

# **THE ECC IN COLOR**

*Perspectives on Sexuality & LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the  
Evangelical Covenant Church*

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The Evangelical Covenant Church has created resources concerning the topic of human sexuality which can be found at the following websites:

[covchurch.org/resource/human-sexuality-guidelines/](http://covchurch.org/resource/human-sexuality-guidelines/)  
[covchurch.org/embrace/](http://covchurch.org/embrace/)

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## **Introduction**

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

“What does it mean to be *Covenant*?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...I had forgotten about Omaha.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*THE ECC IN COLOR* is my statement of hope.

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> Phelan, “Setting Boundaries,” 12.

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

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

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

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

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

My hopes for the survey are

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

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

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

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Rea, email to the Evangelical Covenant Church, September 15, 2025. [https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Email\\_Invitation\\_Final\\_Draft\\_2025.pdf](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Email_Invitation_Final_Draft_2025.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Rea, email, 2025.

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

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

like, my personal recommendation is to start with either Matthew Vines<sup>10</sup> or the late Jack Rogers<sup>11</sup> written contributions on biblical criticism, ethics, and church history, following with the more expansive and inclusive gospel narrative approach of Christopher Hays and his father, the late Richard Hays.<sup>12</sup> Additional resources, from a variety of media, including from Covenant voices, can be found at *THE ECC IN COLOR'S* [website](https://eccincolor.com/).<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>13</sup> <https://eccincolor.com/>

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

...Play it loud.

In Fellowship,

Jonny Rea

*Husband, father, teacher, member, advocate*

Sacramento, CA

April 2026

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<sup>14</sup> Rea, email, 2025.

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



## Historical Background

Much has been written about the historical developments that led to the formation and perpetuation of the Evangelical Covenant Church and its distinct flavor of ecclesiology and biblicism. These writings have come from people far more capable and qualified than myself, and as much as I can, I will be quoting from them and directing you, the inquisitive reader, to engage with my sources in their entirety. I won't be attempting anything like a summary of Karl A. Olsson's 830-page tome of Covenant history, *By One Spirit*,<sup>16</sup> but I would like to pull on what I consider to be some salient threads that necessarily inform the predicament in which the Covenant Church now finds itself. As former Covenant President T. W. Anderson put it, "We want to study the past in order that we may better understand the present and, by the grace of God, plan wisely for the future."<sup>17</sup>

The Evangelical Covenant Church has adopted a list of "distinctives" as part of its ecclesial identity, consisting of "We are..." statements:

- We are Evangelical, but not Exclusive
- We are Biblical, but not Doctrinaire
- We are Congregational, but not Independent
- We are Traditional, but not Rigid<sup>18</sup>

In trying to understand our collective identity as Covenanters, let us take a look at a few historic vignettes through the lens of these Covenant distinctives. These stories are well-known to scholars but may be less so to the average parishioner or casual observer. In any case, readers are invited to look through the source material for a fuller understanding of the context, consequences, and conversation surrounding each of the stories and characters from our shared heritage.

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<sup>16</sup> Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, (Covenant Press, 1962).

<sup>17</sup> T. W. Anderson, "President's Report," *Covenant Yearbook*, 1935, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Everett L. Wilson and Donald Lindman, *What Does It Mean to be a Covenant Church: A Look at Covenant Distinctives*, (Covenant Publications, 1988, 2007).

## *Evangelical, But Not Exclusive*

The Evangelical Covenant Church is both the historical and spiritual successor to the churches of the Swedish Mission Covenant, members of which referred to themselves as “Mission Friends”, congregations of both domestic Swedish churches, and immigrant churches in America. These congregations were united around a common experience. As with all good Protestants, “The Evangelical Covenant Church was born of ‘dissent.’”<sup>19</sup>

Early Covenanters were responding to power structures in both the state-sponsored Swedish Lutheran Church and the influential Swedish-American Lutheran Synods that demanded alignment with the Augsburg Confession as a standard of doctrinal purity required for membership. They gathered as “free churches”, caught up in a revival of *pietism*, an earlier movement in German Lutheranism that “charged the Lutheran church with focusing on doctrinal orthodoxy to such a degree that this eclipsed the experience of faith and its resulting transformations.”<sup>20</sup> In 1842, Swedish lay preacher C. O. Rosenius wrote, “It would not be probable to expect that all Christians, despite being enlightened by the same Spirit, should come to completely the same way of thinking on all spiritual matters here on earth, where we understand and prophesy in part.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1872, Swedish Lutheran pastor P. P. Waldenström troubled the theological waters when he made public a sermon he had preached which directly contradicted the view of the atonement presented in the Augsburg Confession. It was in this sermon that Waldenström made his famous statement—a Covenant favorite, “Where is it written (*Var står det skrivet*)?”<sup>22</sup> Waldenström took issue with the language of the Confession which stated that Christ’s atoning work on the cross reconciled *God* back to *humanity*. He could find no supporting statements to this claim anywhere in the New Testament and thus concluded that the confession of an imperfect document could never replace confession of Christ, himself. What came to be known as The Atonement Controversy “alerted the Mission Friends to the fact that, rather than clarifying Scripture, a confessional statement

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson, “Harmony.”

<sup>20</sup> Hauna Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No: Covenant History and the Third Way,” *The Pietist Schoolman*, June 21, 2019, 2. <https://pietistschoolman.com/2019/06/21/covenant-history-third-way/>

<sup>21</sup> C. O. Rosenius, “Pietism”, *Pietisten*, 1842.

<sup>22</sup> P. P. Waldenström, “Sermon on the Atonement,” *Pietisten*, 1872.

could potentially obscure Scripture's message. Worse still, a confessional statement could *replace* Scripture's authority."<sup>23</sup>

It's worth noting that not everyone in the Christian faith shared Waldenström's willingness to jettison traditional and authoritative doctrinal statements that did not align with his understanding of God revealed in Christ. In 1922, R. A. Torrey, then Dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola University), wrote to North Park Seminary professor and Covenant pastor Axel Mellander concerning Waldenström and his spiritual successors:

I am familiar with Dr. Waldenström's theory of [the atonement], as I have his books, and am confident that in this matter, though he was an excellent Christian man in some respects, he was aiding the work of the Antichrist, and in that matter was a follower of the Antichrist, and that the doctrine of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ is so fundamental that there can be no union between those who believe in it as it is taught in the Word of God and those who deny it. Dr. Waldenström's doctrine of the atonement as quoted in this letter [Mellander's] will not stand the test of careful Scriptural examination ... I have many excellent friends ... in the so-called "Mission Friends," but in so far as they accept this view of the atonement, they certainly are doing the work that the Antichrist desires to be done, and aiding and abetting him to that extent in his work.<sup>24</sup>

The Evangelical Covenant Church is "evangelical, but not exclusive." We find our shared identity in our commitment to the Gospel of Christ, not in drawing up elaborate doctrinal positions that exclude certain people who are otherwise fellow travelers in the journey that is following Jesus. Though it may cause friction with members whose convictions about specific theological and ecclesiological questions might appeal to sectarianism, the Covenant Church chooses to forgo purity for the sake of inclusion. As Waldenström put it, "When a congregation *has room for all who believe in Christ*, such that it does not exclude any members of the body of Christ, but merely the unbelievers, then it would in fact be in its essence entirely a Christian congregation."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ondrey, "Beyond Yes or No," 2.

<sup>24</sup> R. A. Torrey, Letter to Axel Mellander, February 14, 1922, Covenant Archives.

<sup>25</sup> P. P. Waldenström, "Room for All Who Believe," 107.

### ***Biblical, But Not Doctrinaire***

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century American Protestantism was marked by a concerted and energized push towards biblical and theological conservatism, and the Covenant Church found itself enmeshed in the controversy thus inspired. Responding to challenges posed by historical and textual criticism in biblical studies, as well as the proliferation of Darwinian evolution in the natural sciences, *fundamentalism* emerged as a pathway back to doctrinal and ethical security rooted in biblical authority. As Covenant historian Karl A. Olsson wrote, “The Fundamentals movement, both in its formal and informal phases, played a crucial role in the history of the Covenant in the period 1915-33.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1910, the Testimony Publishing Company of Chicago published a series of pamphlets (90 essays in total) titled *The Fundamentals*, edited in part by the aforementioned R. A. Torrey. One consequence of getting down to the fundamentals was the summarizing of the teachings of Christianity into essential doctrines. The most popular summary was “The Five Point Deliverance” of the Northern Presbyterian Church, which affirmed: 1) the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, 2) the virgin birth of Christ, 3) the substitutionary atonement of Christ, 4) the bodily resurrection of Christ, and 5) the historicity of the biblical miracles.<sup>27</sup>

Olsson notes that much of the language of *The Fundamentals* is “assertive rather than argumentative”. He quotes Dyson Hague’s essay on higher criticism:

The qualification for the perception of Biblical truth is neither philosophic nor philological knowledge, but spiritual insight. The primary qualification of the musician is that he be musical; of the artist, that he have the spirit of art. So the merely technical and mechanical and scientific mind is disqualified for the recognition of the spiritual and infinite. Any thoughtful man must honestly admit that the Bible is to be treated as unique in literature, and, therefore, that the ordinary rules of critical interpretation must fail to interpret it aright.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 531. Most of the information I learned about the Covenant’s foray in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy comes from Part III: *Baptized Into One Body*, Chapter VIII: *Groping for an Image*. It is worth reading, if not simply for more detail, then also for Olsson’s obvious affection for the history.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Baker Academic, 2005), 165. Olsson’s own list differs in the fifth fundamental, choosing instead “The Second Coming of Christ.”

<sup>28</sup> Dyson Hague, “History of the Higher Criticism” in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth* (1910) I, 90.

Olsson goes on to write:

This, in itself, is acceptable. If the Bible speaks only to initiates, the scientific efforts of non-Christian critics are immaterial and irrelevant. But if the critical scalpel has been struck from the hand of the unbeliever, it cannot be reclaimed for Christian defense. You can't have it both ways. Either the Bible is in some sense a field of rational inquiry for believers and unbelievers alike or it is not. If it is not, the Scriptures cannot and should not be either attacked or defended by rational means.<sup>29</sup>

This conflict between modernist and fundamentalist understandings of the Bible was no doubt deeply felt by Covenant pastors, scholars, and seminarians. Being located in Chicago, the center of the fundamentalists' publishing efforts, North Park College and Theological Seminary found itself squarely in the middle of the controversy. Neighboring institutions were drawing lines. To the south was the conservative and fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute, and to the...well...further south<sup>30</sup> was the liberal and modernist Chicago Theological Seminary. It's not hard to imagine that North Park, being the focal point of Covenant higher learning, and thus exposed to the scholarship of higher criticism, would also generate attraction toward a movement whose purpose was to elevate the authority of the Bible, even as its espousal of the five fundamentals brought it into precarious proximity with confessionalism.

In 1919 the first World's Christian Fundamentals Convention was held in Philadelphia and attracted over 6,000 attendees. This enthusiasm led to the formation of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) which attracted the likes of William Jennings Bryan when evolutionary theory was identified as a potent threat to biblical historicity. His celebrity caught the attention of the Covenant Annual Meeting, who in 1922 sent to him a resolution which reads:

The Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant, assembled in its 38<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Chicago, June 20-25, hereby expresses to you heartfelt thanks and grateful appreciation for your courageous stand in upholding the doctrines of the Bible, and your effective work

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<sup>29</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 528-9.

<sup>30</sup> Though not *technically* in the geographic center, one can't help but entertain the image of North Park being pulled in opposing directions.

against the enemies of the Holy Scriptures. Our earnest prayer is that God may grant you a long and useful life.<sup>31</sup>

Bryan's role, of course, culminated in the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925, for which Bryan argued for the prosecution. Before passing away in the week following the trial, Bryan spoke at a WCFA meeting in Memphis at which he preached against the "anti-biblical" subject being taught in schools.

One interesting Covenant personality who emerged in this time was Paul W. Rood. Rood graduated from North Park in 1911 and was ordained in 1915<sup>32</sup> before being called to First Covenant Church of Seattle the following year. By 1925, Rood was pastor at Beulah Tabernacle in Turlock, CA (the predecessor to Hope Covenant Church) as well as an evangelist and revivalist to California's Central Valley.<sup>33</sup> Following the death of Bryan, he established the Bryan Bible League for the purpose of spreading fundamentalism. Riffing off of Isaiah 6, he said, "In the year that Bryan died, I saw the Lord."<sup>34</sup> This clearly got the attention of the WCFA, because by 1929, Rood had become the president of that organization. In 1933, Rood returned to Chicago to pastor Lakeview Covenant Church (now Resurrection Covenant) while also maintaining his role as president and organized a month-long evangelistic campaign during the Chicago World's Fair. Two years later, he accepted the position as president of Biola College where he stayed for four years and essentially saved the college from financial ruin.

At the risk of redundancy, I can't help but to emphasize that the impact of fundamentalism on the Covenant Church was so significant that a Covenant pastor, a member of a denomination, mind you, with no official doctrinal confession, was the de facto head of the American fundamentalism movement in its heyday for almost *six years!*

Perhaps even *more* significant to the Covenant's intersection with fundamentalism were the actions of Axel B. Ost and Gustaf F. Johnson. Ost was a North Park Seminary graduate and travelling evangelist, and Johnson, beginning in 1914, was the pastor of The

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<sup>31</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1922, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 533.

<sup>33</sup> "Obituary for Paul W. Rood," Find a Grave, accessed January 22, 2026, [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56145169/paul\\_w-rood](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56145169/paul_w-rood)

<sup>34</sup> Steward G. Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, (New York, 1931), 262-3.

Tabernacle in Minneapolis (later known as First Covenant Church of Minneapolis). Johnson was “neither by origin nor inclination a Covenanter.”<sup>35</sup> He was quite outspoken in his championing of fundamentalist views of biblicism in the fight against liberalism and worldliness. In the first seven years of his ministry the church lost half of its membership. Johnson referred to them, including long-time Covenanters as “dead wood”. “The effect of Johnson’s personality and ministry was to push the Covenant toward theological definition.”<sup>36</sup> This was reflected in a resolution from the 1924 Annual Meeting:

WHEREAS, the fundamental principles of Christianity are continually being assailed, causing confusion and bewilderment in the minds of some and sorrow to the hearts of earnest Christians:

*Be it resolved*, that the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant of America... reaffirm our loyalty to the historic principles of Christianity and our whole-hearted allegiance to the Bible as the infallible word of God and our absolute authority for life and doctrine.<sup>37</sup>

Johnson, Ost, and a number of others aligned with the WCFA began to call out Covenanters who were perceived to be too liberal, if not outright heretical. Individuals such as Covenant president C. V. Bowman, North Park president-emeritus David Nyvall, and dean of the seminary Nils Lund. At the 1927 Annual Meeting, a committee from the Northwest Mission Association, which included Ost and Johnson, “presented a resolution calling attention to the crying need for the revival of a church sunk in indifference and self-righteousness.”

The causes for this situation the committee found in a shaken faith in the infallible authority of the Bible, in the lust for pleasure, in avarice, and in fraternization with the world. The cure would be a revival among leaders and people alike. If no cure was effected, warned the committee, some Covenanters would sink into dead formalism and decadence and others, looking for spiritual life, would be drawn into the sects of the fanatics and hyper-spirituals. It was a solemn resolution to which no one could take exception.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 531

<sup>36</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 532.

<sup>37</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1924, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 536.

Later that year, Otto Högfelt, editor of *Missions-Wänneren*, a conservative publication born out of the Swedish Lutheran Mission Synod, printed criticism of a Nyvall lecture on the nature of fundamentalism and modernism, and then, over the next two weeks, printed Gustaf Johnson's own lectures on modernism. This was followed by an article written by A. B. Ost attacking the use of a book titled *The Making of a Minister* by Charles R. Brown in North Park Seminary classes. Ost had apparently come to the campus to interview students about the faculty. He concluded that the instruction coming out of the seminary was heretical. A series of letters and meetings ensued. Bowman formally requested that Ost and Johnson present charges to the board in writing. They refused. Johnson contended that he had overheard Nils Lund in conversation at a Chicago restaurant which suggested that Lund did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Such was the setup for the tense and pivotal Annual Meeting of 1928, located, of all places, in Omaha, Nebraska. The Covenant executive board, in collaboration with the board of North Park, was prepared to offer a resolution in defense of the school's faculty and administration. North Park board chairman, Hugo Anderson, outlined the events leading to the creation of the resolution and ended his remarks with this prophetic comment, "Truth is not the essential thing in a religious controversy, but personal reputations and personal conquests."<sup>39</sup>

Gustaf Johnson and A. B. Ost were both given chances to speak and clarify their recollection of events and concerns. Ost declared that the lecture titled "How do you read?" that Nils Lund had given to the ministerium at the start of the meeting was in fact heretical "in that it claimed that the Bible contains but is not the Word of God and in its doctrine of progressive revelation."<sup>40</sup>

The Annual Meeting passed the resolution with a large majority, exonerating the North Park faculty, but leaving Ost and Johnson with a feeling of having been wounded. More shots were fired in the following years, including an open letter from the secretary of the Covenant, Joel S. Johnson, who once again questioned the orthodoxy of North

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<sup>39</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1928, 162.

<sup>40</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 540.

Park's curriculum. In 1932, Nils Lund was able to present a statement in defense of his personal faith and professional pedagogy. The Annual Meeting report states:

Lund gave a clear and concise statement of his beliefs and principles and confessed his unqualified faith in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. His method of teaching in which he acquainted his students with different views of Christian doctrine exposed him to misunderstanding and misrepresentation by antagonists. He called attention to views which had become prevalent [in] later years among us, which were not in accordance with the Evangelical Lutheran faith held by the founders of the Covenant, and which he could not accept.<sup>41</sup>

The following year, Lund, Johnson, and Johnson jointly signed a statement that communicated forgiveness for any unkindness or false accusations that may have occurred and a willingness for cooperation in the mission of the church.

In reflecting on the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the determination ultimately made by the Covenant to rely on the Bible as its *sole confession*, Karl Olsson writes:

It is this principle which historically has plunged the Covenant into difficulties in trying to determine heresy. If you really do not know what orthodoxy is, and you cannot know this merely from the uninterpreted Bible, how do you judge heresy? At least the kind of practical heresy which plagues the church? *The answer is that you can't.* You are limited in your discipline to the censuring of those who from the vantage point of their own orthodoxy castigate heretics. The curious fact to be drawn from the history of the Covenant is thus that no one has ever been defrocked for heresy, and, what is even more strange, only those have been brought under serious censure who have questioned the orthodoxy of someone else.<sup>42</sup>

In 1925, David Nyvall had begun publishing a series of articles in the Swedish-language newspaper *Minneapolis Veckoblad*. Titled "Let Us Keep Our Bible," Nyvall was critiquing the fundamentalist tendency toward uncritical literalism, while also upholding the continuity of Covenant traditions of biblical interpretation. He wrote:

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<sup>41</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1932, 139.

<sup>42</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 545. Emphasis mine.

There is no materialism more dangerous and disastrous than the interpretation of Scriptures that does not serve the new covenant, which is Spirit and life, but serves the letter, which kills... When one takes the imagery of the Bible in a literal manner—meaning to imagine these things as literally spoken and literally interpreted—then unnecessary troubles begin and many stumbling stones block the way to one’s faith in the Bible.<sup>43</sup>

He went on to write, the following year:

Because we, as a denomination, are founded on the Bible as the only adequate basis for faith, the question of what inspiration really means is a vital biblical issue. Inspiration does not mean that we have an error-free and self-descriptive Bible. Rather, we have a life-giving proclamation of the truth: life-giving because its content is Christ himself.... One does not read the Bible in heaven, where God is the light. Therefore, the Bible cannot now replace Christ, who is the light, as well as the way, the truth, and the life. Just as it was important for me to insist on this unadulterated source for our faith in the Bible, it was also urgent to insist upon a method for using the Bible that was consistent with this source: in other words, the work of revival... [as] the word’s great task in this world.<sup>44</sup>

The Evangelical Covenant Church is biblical, but not doctrinaire. “[The] history of biblical theology in the Covenant Church clearly demonstrates that, while ‘let us take our Bible seriously’ accurately reflects agreement on biblical *authority*, well-meaning Covenanters would approach its *interpretation* in different ways.”<sup>45</sup> This is *why* diversity is so important: it requires that we recognize the image of God *in the other*, and reminds us to hold at arm’s length the favored beliefs that conform to our own biases.

As we seek to obey God’s will as it is revealed to us in Scripture, we remain humble because we recognize that we could be wrong—that truth may lie outside us. For this reason, we read with open ears and eyes, we read and re-read, humbly open to God’s revelation, as it comes through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> David Nyvall, “Låt oss behålla vår bibel,” Part I, *Minneapolis Veckoblad* (July 28, 1925), 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> David Nyvall, “Låt oss behålla vår bibel,” Part X, *Minneapolis Veckoblad* (January 5, 1926), 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Scott E. Erickson, “‘Let Us Take Our Bible Seriously’: The Ecclesial Nature of Biblical Interpretation,” in *In Spirit and in Truth: Essays on Theology, Spirituality, and Embodiment in Honor of C. John Weberg*, ed. Philip J. Anderson and Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom (Covenant Publications, 2006) 108.

<sup>46</sup> M. Safstrom & H. Ondrey, “Covenanters Reading Scripture Through History,” *Augustana Digital Commons* (2016)

### ***Traditional, But Not Rigid***

The 1920s and early 30s would not be the last time that the Covenant's unique approach to ecclesiology would be challenged by appeals to doctrinal purity. During the post-WWII era, a new approach to American Protestant conservatism emerged in *neo-evangelicalism*. The so-called "new evangelicals", including such figures as Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham, favored an earnest engagement with the culture, as opposed to the more separatist views of the earlier fundamentalists, while still retaining strict adherence to the teachings of the fundamentals, most notably that of the inerrancy of scripture. The influence of neo-evangelicalism within the Covenant played out in the perceived tension between two of our defining affirmations: the centrality of the Word of God, and the reality of freedom in Christ.

Enter one William C. Doughty, pastor of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington. Doughty, after a time at Moody Bible Institute, came to North Park in 1948 to complete his seminary studies, believing the Covenant college to be more in line with his fundamentalist background.<sup>47</sup> By 1952, Doughty was ordained, and in a move reminiscent of A. B. Ost began questioning the orthodoxy of the instruction at North Park. In two articles written for the *North Pacific Conference News* in 1957, he argued that the Covenant was moving away from its traditions and toward liberalism, citing his concerns about the seminary, as well as Covenant Press and the Covenant Youth Department.<sup>48</sup> A number of attempts were made by both the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing<sup>49</sup> and the leadership of the North Pacific Missionary Conference<sup>50</sup> to meet with Doughty, and by April of 1958, he met with his conference's board as well as its superintendent and the secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing to discuss a paper that Doughty had written and begun sharing, called "A Cause for Concern in the Covenant."

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<sup>47</sup> Hauna Ondrey, "Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom (1963): Full Report with Supporting Historical Documents," *Covenant Quarterly*, 75, no. 3-4 (2018): 4-33, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/79/77> Most of my information on the Doughty affair and subsequent work of the Committee on Freedom and Theology comes from this report, including Dr. Ondrey's introduction and the supporting documentation from Annual Meeting minutes.

<sup>48</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958, 236-43.

<sup>49</sup> Now known as the Board of Ordered Ministry.

<sup>50</sup> A past regional conference that corresponds, roughly, with the current Pacific Northwest Conference.

In this pamphlet, “He accused the seminary of being neo-orthodox, and quoted verbatim, although out of context, passages from lectures and discussions purporting to substantiate his thesis.”<sup>51</sup> Disregarding a request made by both boards, Doughty began widely circulating the pamphlet, first among the pastors in his conference, and later to the chairman of every church in the Covenant, requesting that copies be delivered to pastors as well as delegates chosen for the Annual Meeting.

Ahead of the 1958 Annual Meeting, held in Miami Beach, Florida, Doughty had been called to appear before the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing. Doughty requested that the meeting be recorded verbatim, a request which was subsequently denied, and as a result refused to participate. Feeling there was no other choice, the board voted to present a resolution to the Annual Meeting, recommending 1) “That Pastor William C. Doughty be censured for his un-Christian spirit and his willful method of procedure,” 2) that he withdraw his ordination credentials for a year, and 3) that his ministerial license be held on condition of “acceptable ministerial behavior.”<sup>52</sup> The resolution passed and Doughty was censured. He would end up forfeiting his credentials the following year.

The significance of the Doughty affair ended up being far more than just a fleeting period of friction caused by one disgruntled pastor. Following the vote on the resolution, The Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing announced the appointment of a committee to study issues that had seen a renewed focus since Doughty’s pamphlet campaign. Namely, “the nature and scope of our freedom, which we look upon as a unique part of our tradition; and, second, our theological position related to our biblical heritage and to historical Christianity.”<sup>53</sup>

This committee, called the Covenant Committee of Freedom and Theology, spent the next five years studying, conversing, and soliciting feedback on Covenant understandings of “freedom in Christ.” They would ultimately produce a sixteen-page report that was formally adopted at the 1963 Annual Meeting in Chicago.

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<sup>51</sup> Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 619.

<sup>52</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958.

<sup>53</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958, 242.

The report, titled *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, has been referred to by Karl Olsson as a “peak achievement in Covenant history in biblically based theological and ethical thought, in nobility of motive, and in apt and eloquent expression.”<sup>54</sup> Former North Park professor of theology and ethics, Michelle Clifton, wrote, “Indeed, the report is arguably the best theological treatise the denomination has put forth to date.”<sup>55</sup> I enthusiastically agree with these sentiments, as well as with North Park professor of church history Hauna Ondrey’s remarks:

The whole document is an eloquent expression of the Covenant’s historical commitments and should be read at least once by every Covenanter.<sup>56</sup>

The committee starts by recognizing that “As a non-creedal church, the Covenant is subject to periodic pressures from its own membership to define the basis for its unity and the boundaries of its diversity.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, a common refrain from a church community whose conscious acceptance of doctrinal uncertainty and flexibility has repeatedly led to the discomfort and bewilderment of a segment of our membership whose ecclesial background might predispose them to a more bounded set of beliefs.

The report is then divided into two major sections, the first of which addresses a Covenant understanding of the authority of the Bible. In describing the nineteenth-century developments that led the pietist forebears of the Covenant to break from the Swedish Lutheran Church, the committee writes:

The established church of the day honored the Bible and accepted its authority, but its concern was more often with the *letter* than with the *spirit*. Although it was rigidly orthodox, it often did not meet the needs of the heart... The spiritual power of the pietist movement lay in its recovery of a vital and dynamic use of the Bible... the rediscovery of the living view of the Bible which characterized the early Reformation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body...By the Cross*, vol. 2 (Covenant Press, 1986), 359.

<sup>55</sup> Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom: Freedom For All or Free-for-All?” *Covenant Quarterly*, 75, no. 3-4 (2018): 34-54, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/80/78>

<sup>56</sup> Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 4. See below for a link to the original report and see note 47 on page 23 for its reissue.

<sup>57</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom: The Final Report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America, Chicago, Illinois, 1963* (Evangelical Covenant Church, 1963), 4. [https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/npu\\_swecc/id/36973](https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/npu_swecc/id/36973)

<sup>58</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 5. Emphasis mine.

In her commentary about the report, Michelle Clifton identifies “three intersecting yet distinct aspects” of our usage of “the word”:

Theologically, the term *word* has a threefold meaning. First and foremost, it refers to Christ Jesus who was God incarnate. Second, *word* refers to Scripture as the testimony of the living God. Third, *word* can refer to the preached word, highlighting the proclamatory emphasis evangelicals believe is essential to heralding the good news.<sup>59</sup>

The report reads, “The church sees in such revelation the glory and mystery of God who condescends to speak his word through human words and finds in it a mystery which can be compared to the Incarnation of the eternal son in the man Jesus.”<sup>60</sup> Two important reminders are found in this statement. Firstly, that the focus of our attention throughout our encounter with the Bible must always be on Christ, the “word made flesh”.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, that the Bible is a *human* document, and as such demands our honest acknowledgment of its contextually constrained origins as we seek and discern divine guidance from its pages.

Because the Scriptures have arisen within history and are transmitted to us through historical processes, the church in its educational task is obliged to use the best available methods of scholarly research to answer questions pertaining to text, authorship, circumstances of origin, content, and meaning.<sup>62</sup>

The second part of the report tackles “freedom within authority” and is subdivided under three questions: what is the nature of Christian freedom, how has this freedom been experienced in the Covenant, and how can we maintain Christian freedom in the Covenant? There is much that could be discussed here, and again, I would refer the reader to peruse the text of the report in its entirety; perhaps after you finish this present report. Our concern is primarily with the argument that the Covenant way of reading the Bible, what we might call our *tradition*, demands that we maintain the *flexibility* of honoring the diversity found in the mosaic of our congregational body. “The meaning of the Bible or the nature of its relevance is not so clear as to remove all diversities of interpretation... [Accepting] their dependence on God... gives the Christian freedom from bondage to any

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<sup>59</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom”, 37.

<sup>60</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> John 1:14

<sup>62</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 6.

human-made theological system by whatever name it may be called.”<sup>63</sup> The committee goes on to reiterate the threats to division that motivated the Covenant forebears:

While they realized that dogmas, set forms of worship, and "official" interpretations of Scripture served a purpose in the life of the church, they were fearful lest such forms become idols which stand in the way of a living encounter with Christ as disclosed in the word... Therefore, they refused to make any of the written creeds binding in an absolute sense, lest slavish adherence to a credal statement make it difficult to hear and respond to the full implications of the word for their day.<sup>64</sup>

A warning we would do well to acknowledge. They go on to write:

Accordingly, the one basic requirement for membership in the church was the experience of the new birth and a consistent confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. To have added the requirement of uniformity in all doctrinal matters would have been to forget that "our knowledge is imperfect" [cf. 1 Corinthians 13:9] and would have presumed that a final and authoritative theological position was in their sole possession. Its effect would have been to limit their fellowship to the dimensions of a sect rather than permit it to be the household of God in which the living faith expresses itself in varied ways. Thus, our forebears found it spiritually meaningful to live in Christian fellowship with persons holding different doctrinal viewpoints in some important areas as long as their life and spirit witnessed to their submission to Christ and devotion to the word of God.<sup>65</sup>

The Evangelical Covenant Church is traditional, but not rigid. We acknowledge our place in the broader narrative of the biblical and theological tradition of the Christian faith, while also recognizing our limitations and that “we see through a glass, darkly.”<sup>66</sup> The recognition of our freedom in Christ reminds us that multiple interpretations are available to us, and that we must always be filtering our reading of scripture within our social and temporal location through Christ’s command to love God and love others.<sup>67</sup> This freedom also grants us a justification for faithful dissent.

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<sup>63</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10-11.

<sup>65</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:12, KJV

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 22:37-39

Russell Cervin, pastor from Salem Square Covenant Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, wrote in an essay submitted to the Committee on Freedom and Responsibility:

Differences of theological slant are not only inevitable, but they are necessary if we are to keep from settling down into ecclesiastical soliloquy. The static position may be one of orthodoxy according to the accepted group, but it might also be the position of death. As we think and speak and feel God working within us, we challenge one another in the spirit of devotion and humble seeking until our theological faith is corrected and deepened and with greater effectiveness applied to the world context in which we now live.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, from the committee's report:

If we are to be true to this aspect of our heritage, we should sincerely and faithfully use this principle of freedom as a basic element in our existence as a Christian people in today's world... This means, for instance, that we show our brother and sister the courtesy of hearing and of seeking to understand both their words and their meaning and that we do not judge them without allowing them the opportunity of stating their case.<sup>69</sup>

We find ourselves left with a question that has become ever more prescient in the last thirty years. A question for which, in spite of vigorous attempts to solidify consensus, we continue to uncover a variety of answers and uncertainties. A question which was directly addressed in the report on *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*:

Can we maintain the kind of personal relationships required in a Christian fellowship without any limitations other than that we submit to the authority of the Bible as the revelation of God's will, or must we return to uniform dogmas and carefully defined interpretations of Scripture to help us understand one another? In a word, how does the principle of Christian freedom relate to the problems of personal relationships among us today?<sup>70</sup>

Hold onto this as we explore the Covenant's conversation on human sexuality.

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<sup>68</sup> Russell Cervin, Letter to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology (Covenant Archives), 1960.

<sup>69</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 11, 13.

<sup>70</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 12-13.

## **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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

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."<sup>74</sup> 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

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

<sup>72</sup> Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 9-10.

<sup>74</sup> 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 time<sup>75</sup>

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.<sup>76</sup>

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.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Preface to *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality*, viii.

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

<sup>77</sup> 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 111<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois, delegates voted to adopt a *Resolution on Human Sexuality*<sup>78</sup>; 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.<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup>

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

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

<sup>79</sup> *Human Sexuality* (1996).

<sup>80</sup> *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.<sup>81</sup>

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."<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup>

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.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1996, 364.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas Fondell, personal correspondence, February 6, 2026.

<sup>83</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1996, 364.

<sup>84</sup> <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.<sup>85</sup> 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".<sup>86</sup> 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.<sup>87</sup> 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

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<sup>85</sup> David Kersten, personal correspondence, January 9, 2026.

<sup>86</sup> "Resource Papers of the Evangelical Covenant Church," 2008.

<sup>87</sup> 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.”<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.”<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup> Kersten introduced the report by saying, “We respect the seriousness and sensitivity of this topic

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

<sup>89</sup> 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.

<sup>90</sup> Smietana, “Discerning,” 17.

<sup>91</sup> *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.”<sup>92</sup> 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.<sup>93</sup>

The motion that was then put to the Annual Meeting for a vote read, “The Board of the Ordered Ministry recommends to the 119<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>94</sup>

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.”<sup>95</sup>

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*

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

<sup>93</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329.

<sup>94</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329.

<sup>95</sup> Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 15-16.

and *publicly*.”<sup>96</sup> 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.<sup>97</sup>

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.”<sup>98</sup>

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.”<sup>99</sup>

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

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<sup>96</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329. Emphasis mine.

<sup>97</sup> Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 16.

<sup>98</sup> Swanson-Nystrom, “Keeping,” 16.

<sup>99</sup> 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."<sup>100</sup>

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.<sup>101</sup>

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."<sup>102</sup> 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

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<sup>100</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 329-330.

<sup>101</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 2004, 330, 332.

<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup>

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.<sup>104</sup>

## 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.”<sup>105</sup> 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*<sup>TM</sup> 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,

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<sup>103</sup> Keillor, “Redefining.”

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

<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup>

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."<sup>107</sup> 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."<sup>108</sup>

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

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<sup>106</sup> "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic," 2.

<sup>107</sup> 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."

<sup>108</sup> "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.<sup>109</sup>

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*.<sup>110</sup> 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

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<sup>109</sup> "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic," 23.

<sup>110</sup> <https://covchurch.org/embrace/>

rejection of homosexual practice in all forms.<sup>111</sup> 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*.<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> Rogers was Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary, formerly on faculty at Fuller Seminary, and onetime Moderator of the 213<sup>th</sup> 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*.<sup>114</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>113</sup> See note 11 on page 10.

<sup>114</sup> *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.<sup>115</sup>

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*.<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup> 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,

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<sup>115</sup> *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, 21.

<sup>116</sup> <https://comingoutcovenant.com/>

<sup>117</sup> 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.”<sup>118</sup>

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.”<sup>119</sup> 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).<sup>120</sup> 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

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<sup>118</sup> Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?*, 196.

<sup>119</sup> Chu, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?*, 197.

<sup>120</sup> 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.<sup>121</sup>

## 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*,<sup>122</sup> has become one of the best-selling explorations of an affirming Christian apologetic.<sup>123</sup>

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.<sup>124</sup> 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

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

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

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

<sup>124</sup> 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”.<sup>125</sup> 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.<sup>126</sup>

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.<sup>127</sup>

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.”<sup>128</sup> Walter was referring to his own open letter in affirmation of the ECC’s policies that was

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<sup>125</sup> 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>

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

<sup>127</sup> 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.

<sup>128</sup> Gary Walter, “Report on the ECC and Human Sexuality,” presented to the 130<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>129</sup>

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.<sup>130</sup>

In October, Covenant leadership released two relevant documents. The first was “Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality”.<sup>131</sup> This document was an update to a previous set of guidelines issued in 2010.<sup>132</sup> 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.<sup>133</sup> 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.<sup>134</sup>

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

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<sup>129</sup> 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>

<sup>130</sup> 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/>

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

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

<sup>133</sup> Guidelines, 2015, 3.

<sup>134</sup> 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.<sup>135</sup>

The second document was “Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy.”<sup>136</sup> 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.<sup>137</sup>

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

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<sup>135</sup> These concerns have been relayed to me from several Covenant pastors.

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

<sup>137</sup> “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.<sup>138</sup>

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.<sup>139</sup> 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.<sup>140</sup>

## 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.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> 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/>

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

<sup>140</sup> For more on Matt's story, check out this more recent interview: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nv1A\\_fn4GRk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nv1A_fn4GRk)

<sup>141</sup> <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.<sup>142</sup>

## 2018

At the 133<sup>rd</sup> 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.”<sup>143</sup> 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

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<sup>142</sup> “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>

<sup>143</sup> “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?”<sup>144</sup> 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”<sup>145</sup> 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.”<sup>146</sup>

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

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<sup>144</sup> See note 55 on page 25.

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

<sup>146</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom”, 54.

dissent and freedom to the issue of human sexuality, as well as a response from Clifton.<sup>147</sup> 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.<sup>148</sup>

## 2019

On February 7, 2019, Rev. Judy Peterson published “An Open Letter to My Church.”<sup>149</sup> 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.<sup>150</sup> 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.

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<sup>147</sup> “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>

<sup>148</sup> “Responses to Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom,” 57.

<sup>149</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Judy_Peterson_Open_Letter_2019.pdf)

<sup>150</sup> 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?<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> 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.<sup>152</sup>

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."<sup>153</sup> 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

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<sup>152</sup> 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/>

<sup>153</sup> 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.<sup>154</sup>

### **The Removal of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis**

On Friday, June 28, 2019, delegates at the 134<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>155</sup>

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.<sup>156</sup> 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,

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<sup>154</sup> Olson, “Out of the Church Closet,” 89.

<sup>155</sup> 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.

<sup>156</sup> On the off chance that a delegate from the 134<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>157</sup>

As a part of his reflection, Collison wrote a letter to ECC leadership.<sup>158</sup> 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?”<sup>159</sup> 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.”<sup>160</sup>

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

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

<sup>158</sup> 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>

<sup>159</sup> See note 4 on page 7.

<sup>160</sup> 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.”<sup>161</sup> 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.<sup>162</sup> 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

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<sup>161</sup> Collison, “Letter (2017),” 2.

<sup>162</sup> <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,”<sup>163</sup> 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.<sup>164</sup> 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.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Guidelines, 2015, 3.

<sup>164</sup> “Freedom and Responsibility” 2015.

<sup>165</sup> 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”.<sup>166</sup> 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.<sup>167</sup> 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.<sup>168</sup>

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.<sup>169</sup> 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

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<sup>166</sup> 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>

<sup>167</sup> “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>

<sup>168</sup> “Love All”, 2018.

<sup>169</sup>

<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.<sup>170</sup> 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.<sup>171</sup>

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.<sup>172</sup> Following this meeting, FCCM was notified that they

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<sup>170</sup> Carina Aleckson, Email to Jenell Pluim, January 28, 2019.

<sup>171</sup> Carina Aleckson, Email to Jenell Pluim, December 18, 2018.

<sup>172</sup> "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.<sup>173</sup>

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.<sup>174</sup> 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.<sup>175</sup>

The second letter came from ECC president John Wenrich.<sup>176</sup> 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.”<sup>177</sup> Before joining Covenant leadership, Wenrich was pastor at First Covenant Church of Portland, where he collaborated with Portland Fellowship, an ex-gay

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<sup>173</sup> Jeff Houston, “Email to Carina Aleckson,” April 30, 2019.

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

<sup>174</sup> “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/>

<sup>175</sup> “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/>

<sup>176</sup> 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/>

<sup>177</sup> “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.<sup>178</sup> 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.’”<sup>179</sup>

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.*”<sup>180</sup> 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.<sup>181</sup>

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

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<sup>178</sup> Portland Fellowship, “Update Newsletter,” December 2004.

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

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

<sup>180</sup> 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.

<sup>181</sup> 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.”<sup>182</sup>

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.”<sup>183</sup> Stromberg, in his own letter, disputed the veracity of this statement.<sup>184</sup> 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.”<sup>185</sup>

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:

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<sup>182</sup> Wenrich, “Open Letter.”

<sup>183</sup> 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>

<sup>184</sup> 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/>

<sup>185</sup> 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.<sup>186</sup>

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.”<sup>187</sup>

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).”<sup>188</sup> 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

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<sup>186</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Leland_Anderson_Statement_2019.pdf)

<sup>187</sup> L. Anderson, “Statement.”

<sup>188</sup> Leland Anderson, “Letter to John Wenrich,” June 6, 2019. [https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Anderson\\_Letter\\_Wenrich\\_2019.pdf](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.<sup>189</sup>

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.<sup>190</sup>

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

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<sup>189</sup> L. Anderson, “Letter.” The roster from the 134<sup>th</sup> 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).

<sup>190</sup> 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.<sup>191</sup>

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.”<sup>192</sup>

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.<sup>193</sup>

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

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<sup>191</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Glenn_Palmberg_Letter_2019.pdf)

<sup>192</sup> Palmberg, “Regarding.”

<sup>193</sup> *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.”<sup>194</sup>

Also published on June 21 was North Park Seminary professor Hauna Ondrey’s essay on Covenant history and the third way.<sup>195</sup> 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.<sup>196</sup>

Philip J. Anderson, professor emeritus of church history at North Park Theological Seminary, and FCCM member, published his essay three days later.<sup>197</sup> 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.”<sup>198</sup> He wrote pointedly about the potential removal of his congregation:

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<sup>194</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Art_Nelson_Letter_2019.pdf)

<sup>195</sup> See note 20 on page 14.

<sup>196</sup> Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 5-6.

<sup>197</sup> See note 6 on page 7.

<sup>198</sup> 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.<sup>199</sup>

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 134<sup>th</sup> 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 remarks<sup>200</sup> to the Board of Ordered Ministry on June 18 as well as the remarks he presented as a defense before the delegates.<sup>201</sup> 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

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<sup>199</sup> Anderson, “Harmony.”

<sup>200</sup> 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>

<sup>201</sup> 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.<sup>202</sup>

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

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<sup>202</sup> 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.”<sup>203</sup>

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.

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<sup>203</sup> 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.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> 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.<sup>205</sup>

## 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.<sup>206</sup>

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*

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

<sup>206</sup> 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](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.<sup>207</sup>

## **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 137<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>208</sup>

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:

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

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

<sup>208</sup> 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.<sup>209</sup>

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."<sup>210</sup> 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.<sup>211</sup>

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

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<sup>209</sup> "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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Awaken_Freedom_2021.pdf)

<sup>210</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2021_Aug23_Awaken_Board_Memo_to_ECC.pdf)

<sup>211</sup> Morrow and Albinson, letter.

Dick Lucco, then executive director for ministry development.<sup>212</sup> 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.”<sup>213</sup>

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.)<sup>214</sup>

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

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

<sup>213</sup> 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](https://eccincolor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2021_Sep7_MW_Self_Report_Letter_to_BOOM.pdf)

<sup>214</sup> 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](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.<sup>215</sup>

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.<sup>216</sup>

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

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<sup>215</sup> 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>

<sup>216</sup> 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*.<sup>217</sup> The second sermon, preached on August 14, tackled Romans 1:26-27 and the contrast between "natural" and "unnatural" sexual relations.<sup>218</sup>

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.<sup>219</sup> 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

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<sup>217</sup> 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/](https://awakencommunity.podbean.com/e/july-31_lost-in-translation-how-to-love-gay-people-and-the-bible/)

<sup>218</sup> 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/](https://awakencommunity.podbean.com/e/aug-14_lost-in-translation-how-to-love-gay-people-and-the-bible-pt-2/)

<sup>219</sup> Tammy Swanson-Draheim, "Presidential Update and Organizational Design," address given to the 137<sup>th</sup> 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”,<sup>220</sup> 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

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<sup>220</sup> 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.<sup>221</sup>

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.

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<sup>221</sup> “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.<sup>222</sup> 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 Collective<sup>223</sup>, of which David Gushee, who spoke at the MF4i event of 2015, is a board member, and the Curian Network<sup>224</sup>, 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 Network<sup>225</sup>, 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.”<sup>226</sup>

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)

<sup>222</sup> 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/>

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

<sup>224</sup> <https://thecurian.org/>

<sup>225</sup> <https://www.wildfig.org/>

<sup>226</sup> 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*<sup>227</sup>, 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.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> See note 12 on page 10.

<sup>228</sup> Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 223-226.

## Methodology

Before diving into the survey, a brief explanation is warranted about how the survey came about, how it was platformed and disseminated, and what kinds of data we can draw from the responses.

The idea for the survey came from a conversation with a friend who is a Covenant pastor. We were discussing the polarization found in the denomination and how various data sources—documents, essays, private conversations, ministerium votes, Annual Meeting votes, motions, social media posts and comments, discussions at conferences, etc.—provided confusing and sometimes conflicting narratives about how members of the Covenant were acknowledging or evolving in their understanding of sexuality. It was quickly decided that an anonymous survey had the potential to extract clear and honest feedback that could be used both as a temperature check of the denomination in the years following shortly after the second public disfellowshipping of a congregation and to help Covenanters make informed decisions about remaining in and interacting with the fellowship. The driving question was this: “What do pastors and church chairs really think?” To my knowledge, there have been no attempts to poll a large number of Covenanters to solicit specific opinions surrounding sexuality or inclusion.

We determined that petitioning denominational leadership to commission the survey was almost certainly a dead end. If it was to be done, it would have to be done independently. I took charge of the project and spent the next year interviewing dozens of pastors and other current and former Covenant members to learn their stories and insights. I read dozens of documents—books, essays, blogs, and social media posts—to better understand the history of the debate surrounding Covenant identity and sexuality. I drafted what I thought were the most important survey questions and solicited feedback from a number of Covenant pastors, as well as LGBTQ+ Covenanters and their family members. I learned the ins and outs of mass emailing, optimization, and inbox deliverability. I spent many hours compiling church contact information in various spreadsheets.

## The Survey

The survey consists of thirty-four questions spread across four sections: personal demographics, personal experience with the LGBTQ+ community, perspectives regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion within the ECC, and a final question processing the experience of taking the survey. Two of the questions were completely open-ended, and the remaining questions provided multiple answer choices that were intended to reflect a diversity of respondents and of viewpoints. Every question had the option of a write-in response, which many people took advantage of using. No question was mandatory; respondents could skip any question they did not want to answer.

The survey was created using Google Forms and did not collect email addresses. It was completely anonymous, with the option of sharing contact information at the end for the purpose of networking and receiving information about any future projects that might come from THE ECC IN COLOR.

The survey began with the following introductory statements:

**THE ECC IN COLOR:** Perspectives on Sexuality & LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Evangelical Covenant Church

This anonymous survey is intended to collect data from leaders and stakeholders in the Evangelical Covenant Church on current attitudes and beliefs surrounding human sexuality, gender, and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons within the denomination. Please answer the questions openly and honestly and please submit only one response per individual. This form will not automatically collect email addresses and responses will be anonymous and confidential. Should you wish to reach out to the ECC IN COLOR to learn more about future projects, there is an optional contact form at the end of the survey, as well as additional options for how to stay connected.

For the purposes of this survey, we offer the following usage of certain terminology...

*"LGBTQ+" or "Member of the LGBTQ+ community"*

A person that understands themselves to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, intersex, asexual, and/or queer. We are also including any persons who have experienced same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria or fluidity, or are questioning their sexual

orientation or gender identity, whether this experience has been outwardly shared and expressed or not. Other terms we may use to describe members of this community include "queer persons" or "gender and/or sexual minorities". While the term "queer" might have negative connotations for some people, for the purposes of this survey, please understand it to mean "someone who is LGBTQ+".

### *"Affirming"*

A belief surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons within the church that meets the following criteria:

- That sexually active same-sex relationships are morally equivalent to sexually active opposite-sex relationships.
- That identities and expressions of being transgender or gender fluid are morally equivalent to identities and expressions of being cisgender.
- That the humanity and dignity of queer persons should be acknowledged and honored without condition.
- That queer persons should be welcomed to full participation within the life of the church, including, but not limited to ministry service, communion, baptism, ordination, and marriage.

Now, let's begin the survey!

## **Distributing the Survey**

The initial goal was to send the survey by email to every lead pastor and every church chair from all 850+ churches in the denomination. The primary source of that contact information was the Local Church Data from a recent Covenant Yearbook. Some information was missing or out of date, so several hundred entries were cross referenced with information that had been posted to church websites. The audience of the email campaign was extended to include some associate pastors, conference staff and the national Covenant offices staff, Covenant camp directors, and North Park faculty and administrations, as well as my own personal contacts within the Covenant. The audience then grew to include a number of people who were invited over Facebook. About one hundred were contacted personally by me, and another hundred requested a link to the survey after an announcement was put out on the MF4i Facebook page. In total there were

well over 2000 invitations submitted, with instructions that the survey could be shared with any current or former members of the ECC.

The initial email campaign was sent between September 15, 2025 and October 17, 2025, with a follow-up reminder email sent between October 21 and 24, 2025. It was announced that the survey would be closed on November 1, but I left it open until Thanksgiving as there were a few people still asking to complete the survey.

### **The Survey Data**

In total, 307 people responded to the survey, representing a fairly broad cross section of the denomination. There was a pretty even 50-50 split of men and women, and very good representation in terms of generation and regional conference. Racially, respondents were disproportionately white (almost 90%). People identifying as LGBTQ+ represented 8.5% of respondents with 2.3% selecting “maybe” as their personal identification. In terms of their relationship to the Covenant Church, 31.2% were current pastors, 18.6% were former ECC members, and 16% were current members or attenders, with a wide variety of roles covering the remaining responses. The number of respondents attending or most recently attending churches voluntarily or involuntarily removed from the Covenant rosters was 10.2%.

As you look through the responses to the survey questions you will see specific color coding for many of the pie charts and for the write-in responses. The colors refer to questions or respondents that can generally be categorized regarding the posture towards the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the church as *affirming* (shades of purple), *non-affirming* (shades of yellow), and *unclear* (shades of cyan). Wedges of pie charts that feature these three color groups are referring to survey responses that were more-or-less coded by their language into one of these three categories. Respondents were also categorically split based on their responses to six questions in section three of the survey (#1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9). The results were 53.4% *affirming*, 26.4% *non-affirming*, and 20.2% *unclear*. It's important to know that respondents did not self-select into these categories. Respondents who were grouped in the *unclear* category provided conflicting or ambivalent responses to those six questions, but it's possible many would have self-selected into either of the other two choices. When you see this color coding for the write-in responses, the colors

refer to the category that the respondent was grouped into and not to the content of their particular response.

It needs to be said here that the nature of the survey's distribution limits the kind of scientific analysis that can be done to draw general figures and trends that can be applied more broadly to the entire Evangelical Covenant Church. For example, 53.4% of respondents were categorized as *affirming*, but this in no way suggests that 53.4% of *Covenanters* would be categorized in the same way. That is not a conclusion that can be drawn from this survey, and I am not trying to claim anything of the sort. All statistical data is limited to the particular respondents of this particular survey. This will no doubt be frustrating to readers for whom that kind of statistical data would encompass the primary if not exclusive value of a survey of this nature. There are two things to be said about this.

Firstly, is that this kind of polling is not something I personally am capable of doing. To obtain statistical data that can be analyzed for confidence intervals and standard deviations and then applied to the denomination writ large with any amount of accuracy would require a professional polling organization (think PPRI), the work of professional sociologists, preparation and a promotional campaign from Covenant leadership, buy-in from dozens if not hundreds of churches, and tens of thousands of dollars. The present survey represents the efforts of a single individual working from home in his spare time on a cheap laptop. I've spent hundreds of hours and hundreds of dollars to conceive and plan the project, write the survey, write the promotional messaging, compile contact information, solicit feedback, plan the email campaign, execute the email campaign, find and reach out to people on Facebook, respond to emails (both positive and negative feedback), sort through the survey data and prepare it for publication, research information for other sections of this report, and write the report. I'm happy to have done it, but it's important that we all view the survey for what it is and not for what we hope it might have been. Should the content of this report inspire others in the denomination to want to know that kind of statistically significant information, I whole-heartedly endorse the ECC in organizing that effort.

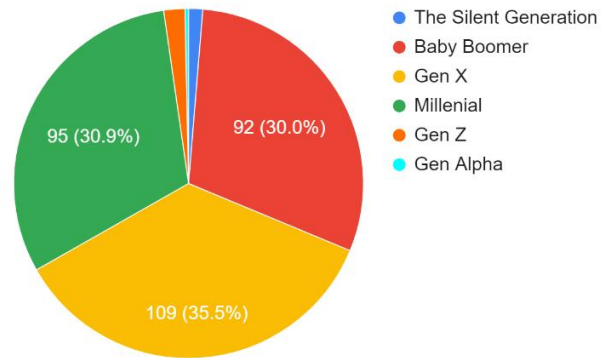
Secondly, that kind of polling wasn't really the point. My goal for the survey was to create a platform in which all kinds of people in and adjacent to the Covenant could give voice to an issue that can't be captured from a vote at the Annual Meeting. The survey was meant to be an invitation for deeper engagement and dialogue. The goal was to tease out perspectives and opinions that otherwise cannot be determined due to policies which undermine the possibility of voicing dissenting positions and an overemphasis on viewing the voting patterns from Annual Meetings as expressing clear understandings of nuanced positions. The survey is not about showing that the majority position has changed. It's about affirming the reality that the minority position is present and valid. I wanted to show that affirming Covenanters exist and that they have stories to be shared and convictions to be heard, as well as to illuminate the perceptions and motivations of the non-affirming contingent which has thus far dominated the conversation. The impetus for the survey was neither dispassionate nor unbiased, but the response choices and open-ended questions were intended to capture a wide variety of honest and unfiltered perspectives, and to that end, I believe the survey was a tremendous success. I invite the reader to read through the responses with an eye to the remarkable diversity that can be found in our fellowship.

## Survey Data

### Section 1: Personal Demographics

Question #1: Which age range/generation do you fall under (year of birth in parentheses)?

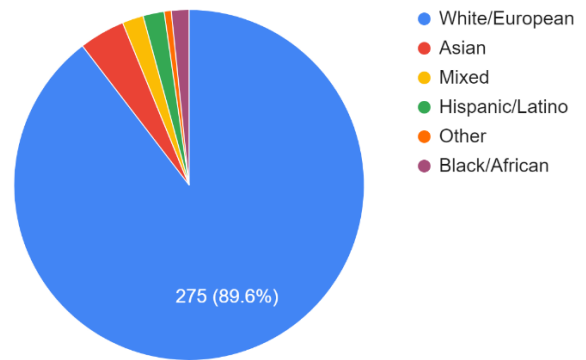
- The Silent Generation (1925 - 1945) – 1.3%
- Baby Boomer (1946 - 1964) – 30.0%
- Generation X (1965 - 1979) – 35.5%
- Millennial (1980 - 1994) – 30.9%
- Generation Z (1995 - 2012) – 2.0%
- Generation Alpha (2013 - present) – 0.3%



Question #2: With which race/ethnicity do you most identify?

*Note: The original survey included the term “Native Alaskan” instead of “Alaska Native” which is the preferred terminology for indigenous persons from Alaska.*

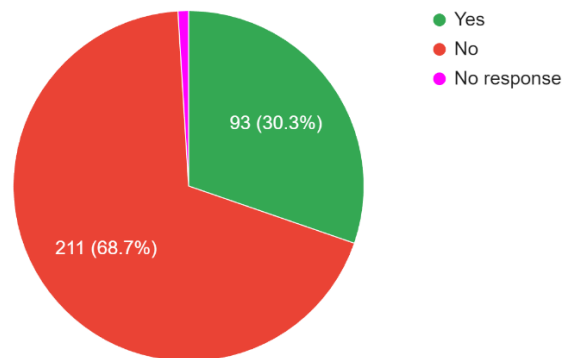
- American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations – 0.0%
- Asian – 4.2%
- Black/African – 1.6%
- Hispanic/Latino – 2.0%
- Middle Eastern/North African – 0.0%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander – 0.0%
- White/European – 89.6%
- Mixed – 2.0%
- Other – 0.6%



*Other Responses:* One respondent wrote “Turkish” and one other declined to answer.

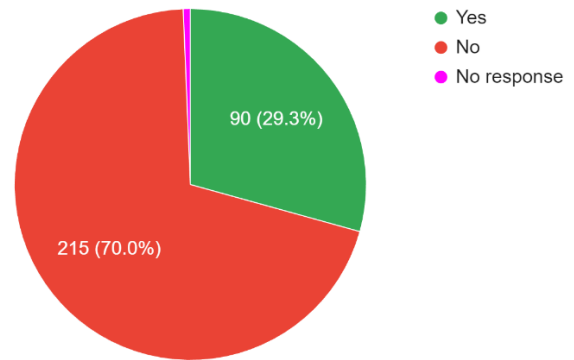
Question #3: Have you ever been a student of North Park University?

- Yes – 30.3%
- No – 68.7%
- No response – 1.0%

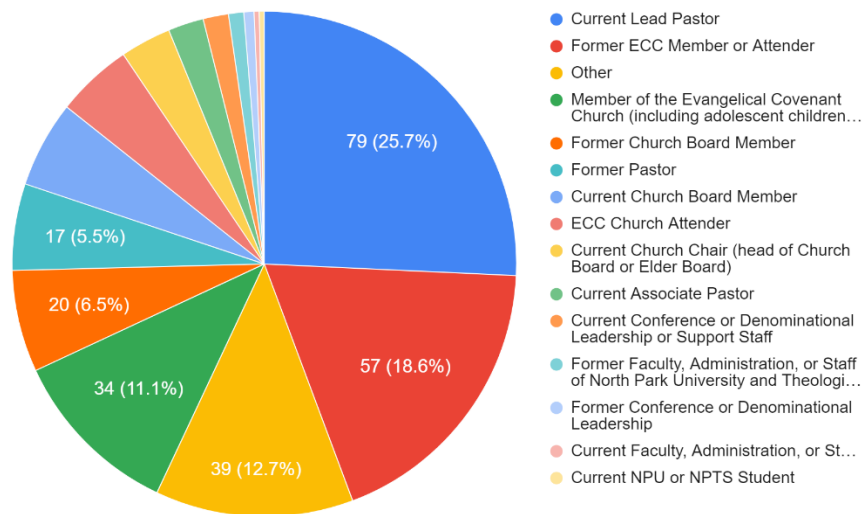


Question #4: Have you ever been a student of North Park Theological Seminary?

- Yes – 29.3%
- No – 70.0%
- No response – 0.7%



Question #5: Which role best describes your current position within the Evangelical Covenant Church? (Feel free to use the "Other" option if your role in the ECC is multivalent.)



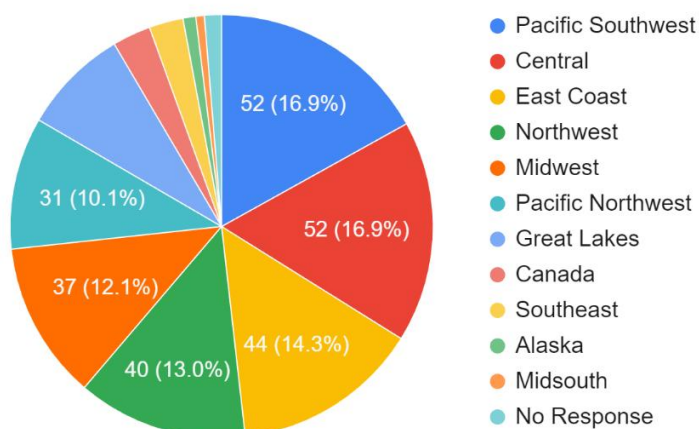
- Current Lead Pastor – 25.7%
- Current Associate Pastor – 2.3%
- Current Church Chair (head of Church Board or Elder Board) – 3.3%
- Current Church Board Member – 5.5%
- Current Conference or Denominational Leadership or Support Staff – 1.6%
- Current Faculty, Administration, or Staff of North Park University and Theological Seminary – 0.3%
- Former Pastor – 5.5%
- Former Church Board Member – 6.5%
- Former Conference or Denominational Leadership – 0.7%
- Former Faculty, Administration, or Staff of North Park University and Theological Seminary – 1.0%
- Current NPU or NPTS Student – 0.3%
- Member of the Evangelical Covenant Church (including adolescent children of members) – 11.1%
- ECC Church Attender – 4.9%
- Former ECC Member or Attender – 18.6%
- Other – 12.7%

Other Responses:

Affirming	Affirming	Affirming
<p><b>Non-affirming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Covenant Camp Associate Director</li> <li>Former Pastor and member-current pulpit supply at ECC church</li> <li>[No Response]</li> </ul>	<p><b>Unclear</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Current Conference staff + Member of an ECC church</li> <li>Former CCC member at previous church and prospective ECC member at current church</li> <li>Global Personnel with Serve Globally</li> <li>Pastor/Spiritual Director</li> <li>Retired ordained ECC pastor</li> </ul>	

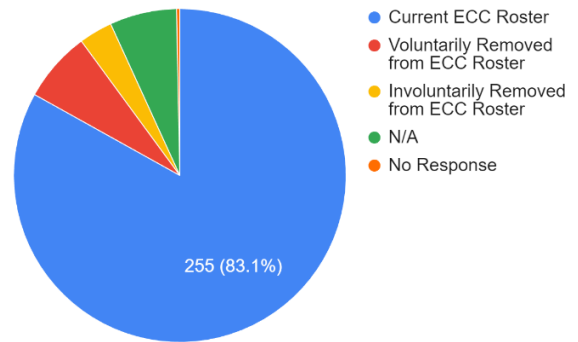
Question #6: In which regional conference of the ECC is the church that you currently attend or most recently attended?

- Alaska – 1.0%
- Canada – 2.9%
- Central – 16.9%
- East Coast – 14.3%
- Northwest – 8.1%
- Midwest – 0.7%
- Midsouth – 12.1%
- Northwest – 13.0%
- Pacific Northwest – 10.1%
- Pacific Southwest – 16.9%
- Southeast – 2.6%
- No Response – 1.3%



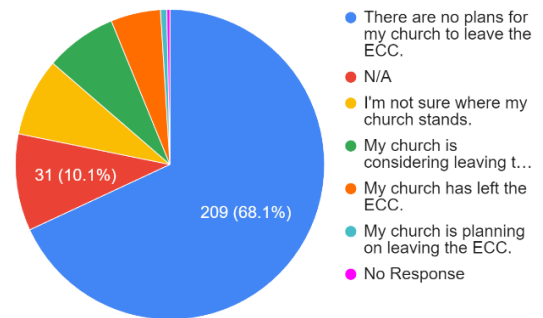
Question #7: What is the status of the ECC church that you currently attend or most recently attended?

- Current ECC Roster – 83.1%
- Involuntarily Removed from ECC Roster – 3.3%
- Voluntarily Removed from ECC Roster – 6.8%
- N/A – 6.5%
- No Response – 0.3%



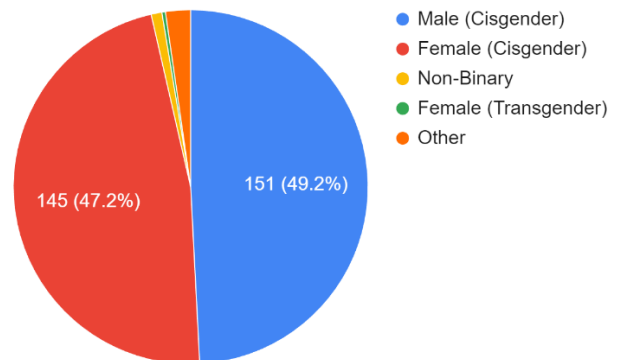
Question #8: To your knowledge, is there any discussion of the church that you currently or most recently attended leaving the ECC?

- There are no plans for my church to leave the ECC. – 68.1%
- My church is considering leaving the ECC. – 7.5%
- My church is planning on leaving the ECC. – 0.7%
- My church has left the ECC. – 5.2%
- I'm not sure where my church stands. – 8.1%
- N/A – 10.1%
- No Response – 0.3%



Question #9: Which choice most closely corresponds to your gender identity?

- Male (Cisgender) – 49.2%
- Female (Cisgender) – 47.2%
- Male (Transgender) – 0.0%
- Female (Transgender) – 0.3%
- Non-Binary – 1.0%
- Agender – 0.0%
- Gender Fluid - 0.0%
- I'm Not Sure – 0.0%
- Other – 2.3%



#### Other Responses

##### Affirming

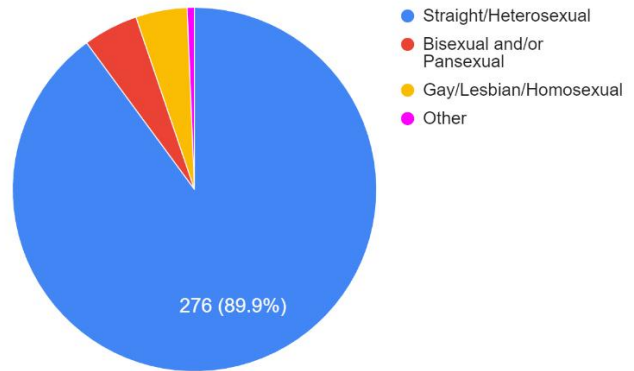
- Female who does not use the term cisgender.
- Just a man

##### Non-affirming

- I am a child of God - This is the primary label to which I ascribe
- I don't even agree with the premise of the question.
- Male
- Male - I am so happy to be what God made me to be.
- [No Response]

Question #10: Which choice most closely corresponds to your *sexual orientation*?

- Straight/Heterosexual – 89.9%
- Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual – 4.6%
- Bisexual and/or Pansexual – 4.9%
- Asexual and/or Aromantic – 0.0%
- I'm Not Sure – 0.0%
- Other – 0.7%

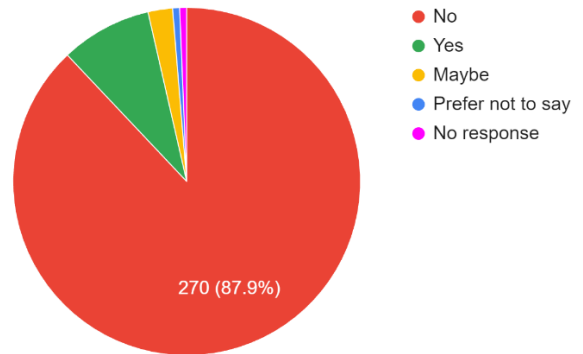


Other Responses



Question #11: Do you consider yourself to be LGBTQ+?

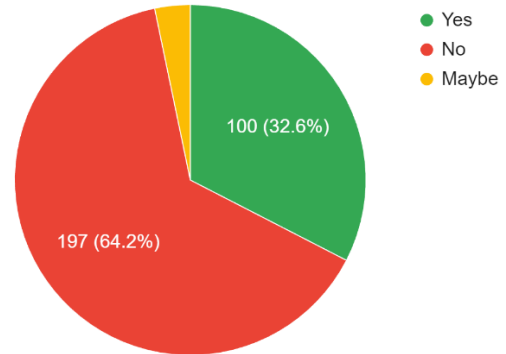
- Yes – 8.5%
- No – 87.9%
- Maybe – 2.3%
- Prefer not to say – 0.7%
- No response – 0.7%



## Section 2: Personal Experience with the LGBTQ+ Community

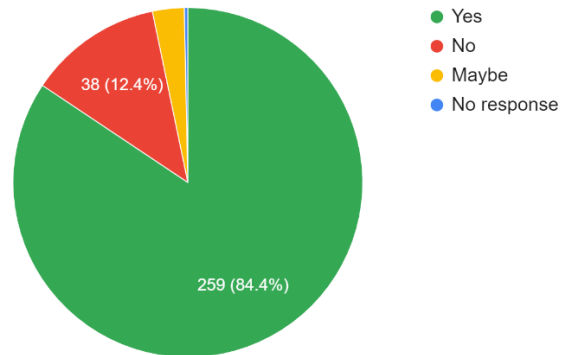
Question #1: Do you have an immediate family member (child, parent, sibling, or spouse) who is LGBTQ+?

- Yes – 32.6%
- No – 64.2%
- Maybe – 3.3%



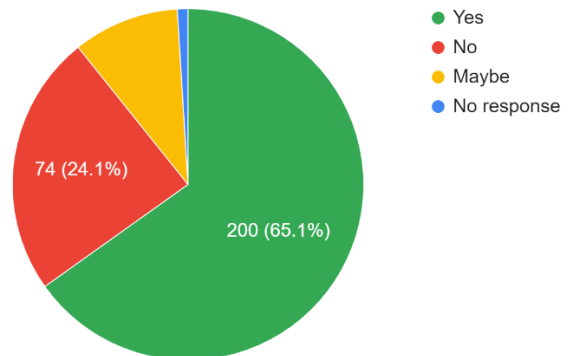
Question #2: Do you have an extended family member or a close personal friend who is LGBTQ+?

- Yes – 84.4%
- No – 12.4%
- Maybe – 2.9%
- No response – 0.3%



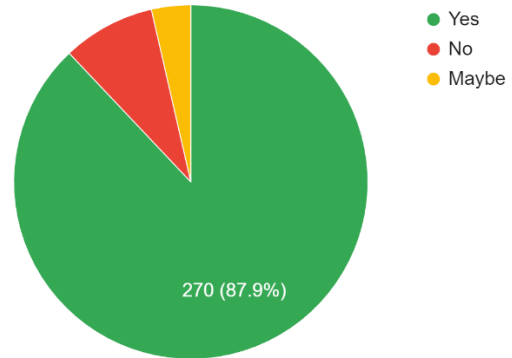
Question #3: Do you have a friend or acquaintance within your church congregation who is LGBTQ+?

- Yes – 65.1%
- No – 24.1%
- Maybe – 9.8%
- No response – 1.0%



Question #4: Do you have an acquaintance, colleague, or friend from your occupation or other social organization you are a part of who is LGBTQ+?

- Yes – 87.9%
- No – 8.5%
- Maybe – 3.6%

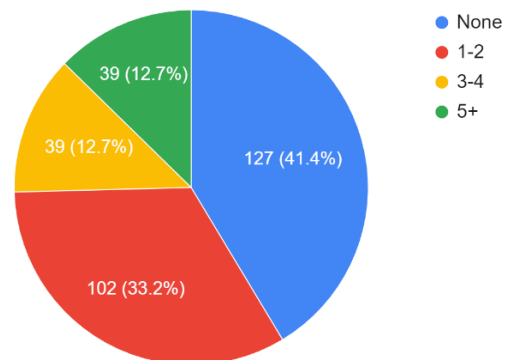


Question #5: Have you read or are you currently reading any books that call for a fully affirming theology and posture towards LGBTQ+ persons within the broad ecumenical Christian Church?

Including, for example, but certainly not limited to the following books:

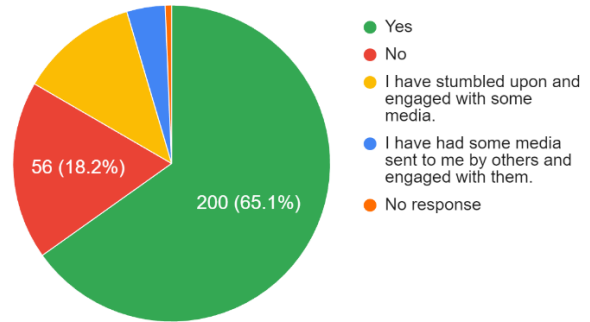
- *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines
- *Changing Our Mind* by David Gushee
- *Torn* by Justin Lee
- *The Widening of God's Mercy* by Richard and Christopher Hays
- *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* by Jack Rogers
- *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* by James Brownson
- *UnClobber* by Colby Martin
- *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon* by Kathy Baldock
- etc...

- None – 41.4%
- 1-2 – 33.2%
- 3-4 – 12.7%
- 5+ – 12.7%



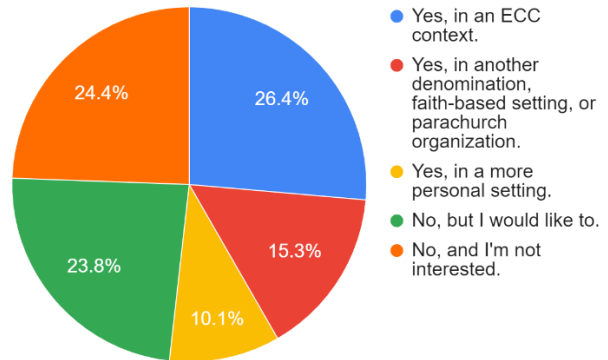
**Question #6:** Have you intentionally sought out and listened to or read other **media** that calls for a fully **affirming** theology and posture towards LGBTQ+ persons within the broad ecumenical Christian Church? These forms of media would include, but are not limited to movies, documentaries, YouTube videos, speeches or sermons, articles, blog posts, and podcast episodes.

- Yes – **65.1%**
- No – **18.2%**
- I have stumbled upon and engaged with some media. – **12.1%**
- I have had some media sent to me by others and engaged with them. – **3.9%**
- No response – **0.7%**



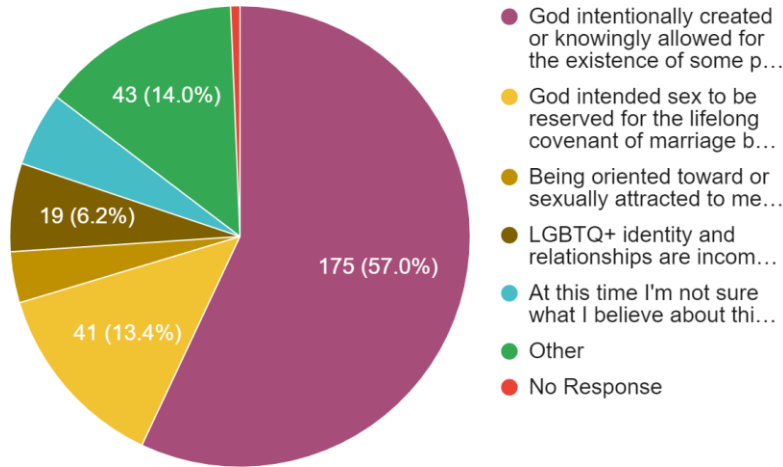
**Question #7:** Have you ever been involved in a group study, either as a small group, focus group, board, ministry team, pastoral team, whole congregation, or a conference or denominational group, that was organized for the purpose of studying LGBTQ+ inclusion, gay marriage, ordination of queer persons, or other related topics of the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and the Christian faith?

- Yes, in an ECC context. – **26.4%**
- Yes, in another denomination, faith-based setting, or parachurch organization. – **15.3%**
- Yes, in a more personal setting. – **10.1%**
- No, but I would like to. – **23.8%**
- No, and I'm not interested. – **24.4%**



### Section 3: Perspectives Regarding LGBTQ+ Inclusion Within the ECC

Question #1: Which statement most closely aligns with what you currently believe to be the correct Christian view on human sexuality as it relates to sexual orientation?



- God intentionally created or knowingly allowed for the existence of some people to have sexual attractions to members of the same sex. God blesses sexual relationships between members of the same sex within certain ethical boundaries. (Sometimes referred to as "Side A") – **57.0%**
- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers (queer and straight alike) to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex (sometimes referred to as a "mixed-orientation marriage"). This position acknowledges the reality of sexual orientation and that queer identity is a healthy way of communicating one's experience and desires. (Sometimes referred to as "Side B".) – **13.4%**
- Being oriented toward or sexually attracted to members of your own gender is sinful, a spiritual sickness, and must be repented of and cured. Heterosexuality is seen as God's best for all people. Efforts to change a person's sexual attraction should be promoted. It is appropriate for a person who has repented for their same-sex attraction or sexual activity to refer to themselves as "ex-gay". (Sometimes referred to as "Side X".) – **3.6%**
- LGBTQ+ identity and relationships are incompatible with the Christian faith. Therefore, Christians attracted to their own sex should renounce LGBTQ+ identification and use non-identity ways for explaining their experience. All Christians are called to remain single or enter an opposite sex marriage. Under this belief, the use of conversion therapy to change a person's sexual attractions is generally not supported. (Sometimes referred to as "Side Y".) – **6.2%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **5.2%**
- Other – **1.0%**
- No response – **0.7%**

Other Responses:

#### Affirming

- Homosexuality is a result of the fall, but that doesn't make them being gay a sin. They should be allowed to live a full and complete life including marriage with those they are attracted to with no repercussions. God blesses their marriages and they can show God's covenant love through the way they live their lives together. (Side A, but with a twist)
- Human sexuality is not reserved to a hetero or monogamous relationship.
- I am now agnostic and have no belief about God. However, if I did, my belief would most closely align with Side A.
- I am theologically challenged by a complete "Side A" position, but in terms of relationships, compassion, justice, and love I adhere to "Side A".
- I believe God intentionally created human beings with a beautiful diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, all of which bear the divine image and are inherently good. Loving, mutual, and life-giving relationships between queer people are fully blessed by God when lived within the same ethical boundaries of love, justice, and fidelity that apply to all

relationships. Any theology that denies LGBTQ+ people's full dignity or calls them to a standard different from their straight/cisgender siblings distorts both the gospel and the witness of the church.

- I believe that God created LGBTQIA+ individuals and they are compatible with Christianity. I do not believe sexual relationships must only occur in marriage, because there is no scripture that requires it.
- I do not believe there are any boundaries within same sex marriage, attraction. Closer to option 1 without limitations.
- I don't think homosexuality is a sin. I think sex is important and the bible points towards monogamous relationships where sex is treasured and treated with reverence, but these views on human sexuality are rife with both American evangelical bias & recency bias. The framework that personal identity is based on sexual desire is a fairly new/western development that bears no resemblance to what we know of first-century societies in Asia minor or the middle east. If the first choice in this list was the one I most closely identify with, the language is still troublesome. I don't believe God created us with our primary identifiers being based on desire. Check out "The End of Sexual Identity" by Jenell Paris.
- I love all people despite their gender identity; however, I have some issues with terminology or pronouns, and the support of the medical community regarding research into the treatment of women and. Various conditions that affect women only and their bodies.
- I would go further than the first option to say that God doesn't just bless but celebrates same sex relationships and attraction, created it and sides with those oppressed by the ECC and other churches.
- Love is love. No one is excluded.
- Something close to the first question that is not shrouded in the belief that there is a moral or ethical code that applies only to the LGBTQ community.
- While God's design in Eden was for men and woman to be full complimentary partners, we are far from that. To place orientation or gender identity as a moral qualifier in any way, or to assume that straight marriage more accurately reflects Gods intention simply due to orientation is hubris. In humility, LGBTQ folks need to have full rights in the church including leadership and marriage. All are fully valued, fully blessed without condition. Scripture gives us guidelines for discerning spiritual leaders. These include things like humility and love, not orientation or gender identity.

### Non-affirming

- All sexual orientations must be submitted to the authority of God the creator, and the best way to understand that is through the authority of Scripture empowered by the discernment of the Holy Spirit. All new revelation will not come in contradiction with past revelation.
- God created two sexes, male and female. God's design for marriage is between one man and one woman. Alternative genders are a result of the Fall; sinful and outside of God's design for humanity. Acceptance and embracing of alternative genders (sexes) is unacceptable. Same sex relationships and marriages are contrary to God's design and are also unacceptable. With love, we are to point individuals confused about their sexuality to God and Christ and the teaching of the bible and the Holy Spirit to deliver them from sexual sin and embrace their God given biological sexual identity.
- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman.
- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers (queer and straight alike) to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex (sometimes referred to as a "mixed-orientation marriage"). This position does not require acknowledging sexual orientation and queer identity as a healthy way of communicating one's experience and desires, since it presumes that anything other than God's intentions with His creation are--by definition--sinful. This position does not go so far as to promote the "forced changes" of "Side X" or the essential "incompatibility" with Christianity of "Side Y"--it simply declares LGBTQ+ behaviors are sinful, and that all sinful behaviors (not just those within the context of human sexuality) should not be affirmed, even though the people themselves should be graciously embraced.
- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers (queer and straight alike) to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex. I also believe that trans have a mental illness and need mental health care and support, not a catering to their false identity and affirmation of some internal struggles they experience. I also believe that being same sex attracted isn't the problem, it's when people act out their sinful sexual desires that it becomes problematic. I have many thoughts on this - primarily that our identity is about being a child of God and not our sexual inclinations. I could go on, but I think you understand my standing.
- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers (queer and straight alike) to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex. Same-sex attraction is a result of the curse and cannot be embraced as healthy, since it--like all other sin, including heterosexual formation, adultery, deceit, pride, unkindness, etc. - are evidence of human kinds' spiritual death and the curse of sin that lies on our world. Like all sin, it can tempt a Christian and there's nothing sinful about being tempted. But as with all other sin, engaging in it is wrong and to be repented of. This covers homosexuality only. There are only two genders, male and female, made by God to image himself as they exist and work together. God

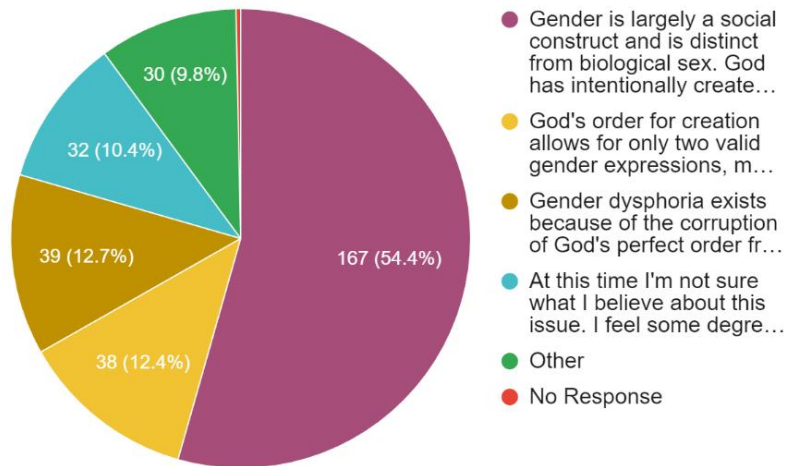
does not make errors in his creation, and those who believe they are not the sex God created them must be lovingly helped to understand God better and trust him faithfully with the circumstances of their lives.

- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex. Being oriented toward or sexually attracted to members of your own gender is sinful and must be repented of. Heterosexuality is seen as God's best for all people. Efforts to change a person's sexual attraction should be promoted.
- <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>
- Human Sexuality (Biblical Definition): Human sexuality is God's good design in creating humanity as male and female, both bearing His image (Genesis 1:26–27). It encompasses our identity as embodied, gendered beings and our capacity for relational intimacy, reflecting God's purposes for companionship, covenant, and fruitfulness. Sexual expression is intended to be holy, reserved for the covenant of marriage, and to mirror Christ's faithfulness to His people (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5; Hebrews 13:4). Marriage (Biblical Definition): Marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman, established by God at creation (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6). It is a lifelong, exclusive relationship of love, faithfulness, and mutual self-giving, ordered toward companionship (Proverbs 18:22), the bearing and raising of children (Genesis 1:28), and displaying the mystery of Christ's sacrificial love for His church (Ephesians 5:22–33).
- I believe in the Biblical definition of marriage. One man and one woman. People that struggle with same sex attraction should remain celibate.
- I believe what the Bible teaches on marriage and sex. It should be only between a man and a woman in marriage.
- I take the Biblical view.
- I tend toward what you would call "side B." However, I would never encourage someone to be married without levels of connection and attraction in spiritual, emotional, and physical area. I do not affirm that an LGBTQ identity is in anyway God's intended desire and that the embracing of my wants and needs is rarely within the ethos of scripture. It is only in the full willingness to die to our desires that we can embrace God's desires. I do not believe that marriage is the answer to the fulfillment of God's desires.
- LGBTQ+ identity and relationships are incompatible with the Christian faith. I believe that our biological sex defines our identity. People may experience same-sex attractions, but they should not consider those attractions as indicative of their identity. All Christians are called to remain single or enter an opposite sex marriage.
- Most closely align with Side B but do not see an alternative sexual orientation as healthy but also don't see it as something that has to be cured. All sin needs to be repented in everyone of us.
- Side B- God intended sex to be reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, God calls all believers (queer and straight alike) to a life of celibacy within community or to a monogamous marriage with a member of the opposite sex (sometimes referred to as a "mixed-orientation marriage"). This position acknowledges the reality of sexual orientation, however understands that queer identity is an unfortunate way of communicating one's experience and desires. (Sometimes referred to as "Side B".)
- Since the fall, people may have a type of sin they're more susceptible to struggle with. Just because current society now embraces and celebrates it doesn't make it any less of a sin. Including other non-sexual sins as well.
- somewhere between "Side X" and "Side Y"
- These definitions are too long and complex for me to check one. My personal stance would be a combination of 2-3.
- We fully support the current ECC human sexuality belief.

### Unclear

- Currently moving between Side A and Side B, but not quite fully to Side A yet...
- God intended for marriage to be between one man and one woman, but as in other areas of life, God's intentions have not always been realized. I believe his heart is for all people, regardless of this reality. My call, as a follower of Jesus, is to strive to have the heart of God toward others, as Jesus so often demonstrated.
- God is inclusive of all people created in His image. Our views don't separate anyone from God regardless of their views on sexuality or mine.
- I lean heavily towards the first option "God intentionally created..." but if I am being completely honest it's still something that I am not 100% sure of.
- I'm not sure if I'm A or B but I'm not X or Y. I'm also not sure how much God really wants us to focus on who other people have sex with. I understand discrimination and pain within the church calls Christians to pay attention, though.
- mixture of several
- My theological conviction is side B, but think God may make accommodations due to human limitations.
- None of these statements fully represent my personal beliefs about this. I am closest to "Side A", but generally prefer to start from the question of what is healthy sexuality before targeting a single form of attraction for a specific position.
- Not sure at this time but not ambivalent. Open to different perspectives and recognize it is not so absolute.
- Some mix of Side A and B. Side A.5?

Question #2: Which statement most closely aligns with what you currently believe to be the correct Christian view on gender identity and expression?



- Gender is largely a social construct and is distinct from biological sex. God has intentionally created or knowingly allowed for the existence of some people who have a gender identity that does not necessarily align with their biological sex (also referred to as the "sex assigned at birth"). These individuals may be referred to as transgender, gender fluid, or non-binary and may include, but are not limited to people who are intersex. People who experience these gender identities should always be referred to with their preferred names, titles, and pronouns. Furthermore, they should be fully affirmed into the life and ministry of the Church. – **54.4%**
- God's order for creation allows for only two valid gender expressions, male and female, and that these genders correspond with a person's biological sex. A person experiencing gender dysphoria should receive support, prayer, and therapy until their gender identity aligns with their biological sex. It is okay to use someone's preferred name and pronouns so long as it is communicated that God's will for that person is that they are set free from their gender dysphoria. – **12.4%**
- Gender dysphoria exists because of the corruption of God's perfect order from The Fall. Choosing to live into a gender identity that does not align with one's biological sex is a sinful rejection of God's will. A person should seek to find their identity in Christ as opposed to the disordered identities promoted by the world. It is inappropriate to use a person's preferred name and pronouns when they do not align with the person's biological sex. – **12.7%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **10.4%**
- Other – **9.8%**
- No response – **0.3%**

Other Responses:

### Affirming

- Again, I'm agnostic. But if I were not, I would choose the first option.
- First Statement but do not agree that gender is largely a social construct.
- Gender dysphoria is a blanket label that encompasses a number of disparate experiences. Gender and biological sex may mean different things in different contexts, even to the same person. God desires all humanity to live lives that are fully integrated with body, mind and spirit, and that are based on self-giving love. God is not gendered, and only the spectrum of sex differences can collectively paint a picture of the image of God. God has created a self-creating universe, and is fundamentally a God of relationship, of love. Seeing the universe as an expression of Will (i.e. "god allowed" or "God intended") fundamentally frames God as a puppet master whose central characteristic is the willful exercise of power, which I believe is wrong. Therefore, we ought to frame this issue as "how would the God we know through Jesus respond with love and wisdom?"
- I believe God created humanity with a diversity of genders and expressions that cannot be reduced to rigid binaries. Gender is a complex interplay of biology, identity, culture, and spirit, and all gender identities (including transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid) reflect the image of God. To deny or suppress someone's gender identity/expression is to reject part of God's creative work. Faithfulness to Jesus calls us to affirm people fully in their lived gender, using their names and

pronouns, and to welcome them into every aspect of the Church's life and ministry. This affirmation is not accommodation but discipleship, rooted in love, truth-telling, and justice.

- I believe that gender dysphoria is real. I do believe that some (not majority) of this dysphoria can come from brokenness in our world. However, I fully believe that we must affirm and acknowledge the discerned gender of each individual, no matter what!
- I'm not sure, but I would not say ambivalent. I think I just haven't had as much time to sit with this as the marriage one. But of these options, I lean more toward the first.
- See my answer above. I don't think the discussion on a Christian view of gender identity can even happen until the implicit bias on these subjects is unpacked. I don't think God gives a shit about gender identity, nor should we. God gives a shit about the marginalized, therefore we should give a shit about the marginalized and oppressed. Since those people today are the LGBTQ+ community, we should defend them and make space for them at the communion table because there are far too many loud voices telling them they're unloved. They are loved, welcome, and necessary in God's creation.

### Non-affirming

- Again, I don't accept the first one but parts of the 2nd & 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- Again, I identify most clearly with Options 2 and 3 above, up until the point where we attempt to actively force people to change until they meet our own standards of rectitude. We can believe that someone's gender identity constitutes dysphoria while still affirming the human being with grace.
- Gender dysphoria exists as part of the brokenness of a fallen world. Choosing to live into a gender identity that does not align with one's biological sense is subjective confusion and unreality. It is disregarding the reality of your God-given objective identity. A person should seek to find their identity in Christ, as opposed to the disordered identities and confusion promoted by the world. I would choose to meet the person where they are at, but work toward helping them reject the confusion, and come to terms with their objective, biological identity.
- Gender dysphoria exists because of the corruption of God's perfect order from The Fall. Choosing to live into a gender identity that does not align with one's biological sex is a sinful rejection of God's will. A person should seek to find their identity in Christ as opposed to the disordered identities promoted by the world. It is inappropriate to use a person's preferred pronouns when they do not align with the person's biological sex. It is appropriate to use a person's preferred name not given to them at birth.
- Gender Identity (Biblical View) God created humanity in His image as male and female (Genesis 1:26–27). Gender is not self-determined but divinely given, rooted in God's creation and revealed through our biological sex. While sin and the fall have brought brokenness and confusion into every aspect of human life (Romans 8:20–23), including our sense of identity, Scripture affirms that our gender is part of God's good design and should be embraced as such (Psalm 139:13–16). Our true identity is ultimately found in Christ, not in self-definition (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3). Gender Expression (Biblical View) The Bible teaches that men and women are equal in dignity and value yet distinct in their roles and expressions (Genesis 2:18–24; 1 Corinthians 11:3–16). Gender expression should honor God's design, reflect modesty, and avoid intentional confusion between male and female distinctions (Deuteronomy 22:5). At the same time, Scripture emphasizes inner godliness over external appearance (1 Peter 3:3–4).
- God created man and woman.
- God does not/did not make mistakes but is holy and pure. Our genetic makeup is part of His creation, not some arbitrary biological phenomenon.
- God's order for creation allows for only two genders, male and female, and these correspond with the person's biological sex.
- I don't like these options; they are too polarized / binary. There's really no "Side B" option here. People have gender dysphoria or are trans, and that is real and can't be changed (there is a spectrum here as well, with some who experience this more severely than others so perhaps a type of 'change' can happen in the lesser cases, but where their gender identity is still a part of their ongoing story. It also should be noted that many teens today are approaching gender like it is multiple choice. I have two kids in middle school and see it with their friends. These are different cases than the adults I know (or teens who are genuinely trans) who are crippled by the struggle.) I don't believe the solution is to transition. I also don't believe a truly trans person can become cisgender. There is a middle road of acceptance and of broadening our understandings of socially-acceptable masculine and feminine categories, which is how I approach this pastorally. I'm surprised/disappointed that a view like this isn't represented on this survey, and my guess is a lot of Covenanters would hold to something similar to this. The current choices pit A against B & C, which is like pitting Side A against Side X and saying pick one.
- I mostly agree with the first view, with some nuance. I'm very hesitant to be fully affirming of physical transitions such as puberty blockers, hormonal treatments, or surgical options. I believe that when an individual experiences some sort of gender dysphoria, the problem lies with the psychological impact of gendered social constructs, not the body itself. Additionally, the research on the long-term impacts of medical transition options is still underdeveloped. I'm more

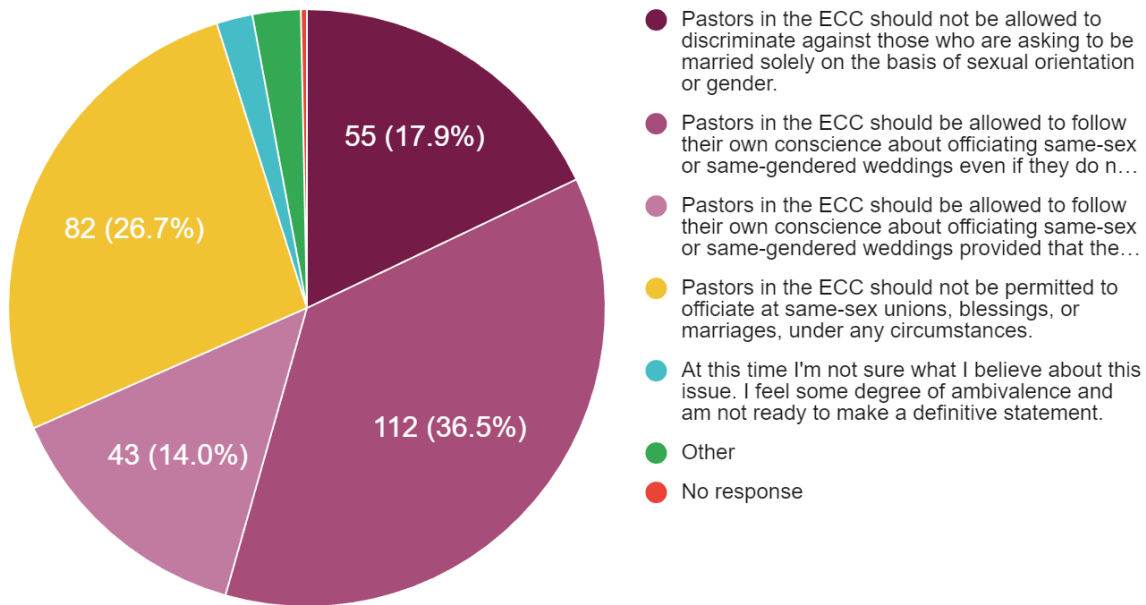
inclined to encourage therapy while acknowledging that therapy may not result in a gender identity that aligns with biological sex.

- I'm in a space between the 2nd and 3rd option, while not fully agreeing with either statement.
- Male and Female, He created them. Two biological sexes. Definitions of gender are rooted in masculinity and femininity which are socially constructed.

### Unclear

- Between 1 and 2.
- I believe persons experiencing gender dysphoria should, first of all, have their rights and safety protected in society and in the church. I am deeply concerned about irreversible medical treatments given to minors for gender dysphoria. The participation of biological males who have undergone male puberty in women's only sports is problematic from the standpoint of fairness and safety. At the same time, we want the church to be open to transgender individuals. So, it's a mixed answer, I suppose!
- I closely align with option #1. I have issues with preferred names, titles and pronouns.
- Most closely with the first option. I am still working through my beliefs though. I was raised with basically the 3rd belief, which feels like the opposite of the 1st. Therefore, my mind and heart have been working through this.
- Mostly option A (Gender is largely a social construct and is distinct from biological sex...) but unsure on full affirmation.
- None of these fully represent my understanding of gender. I would take elements of all three. The most important part to me, though, is that people should be fully affirmed into the life and ministry of the church, regardless of definitions of sex and gender, and that their preferred names, titles and pronouns should be respected and used.
- None of these positions really represent the complexity I see. I don't think all gender queer people are talking about or experiencing the same thing and it requires more individualized responses. I also don't think gender expression and medical treatments are equal.
- Not sure, but not ambivalent.
- The first option: "Gender is largely a social construct..." best fits my views. As with the previous question, I am not 100% sure and am still seeking knowledge on the subject.
- We all suffer identity harms due to our fallen nature. Those who are queer should be given grace to live the best way they can under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Wording and explanations in this question are difficult.

Question #3: Which statement most closely aligns with your perspective on the officiating of same-sex or same-gendered weddings within the Evangelical Covenant Church?



- Pastors in the ECC should not be allowed to discriminate against those who are asking to be married solely on the basis of sexual orientation or gender. – **17.9%**
- Pastors in the ECC should be allowed to follow their own conscience about officiating same-sex or same-gendered weddings even if they do not have broad approval from their congregation. – **36.5%**
- Pastors in the ECC should be allowed to follow their own conscience about officiating same-sex or same-gendered weddings, provided that they have broad approval from their congregation. – **14.0%**
- Pastors in the ECC should not be permitted to officiate at same-sex unions, blessings, or marriages, under any circumstances. – **26.7%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **2.0%**
- Other – **2.6%**
- No response – **0.3%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- At this time, I lean more toward the 1st option (pastors should not be allowed to discriminate) but I wouldn't want to force someone who has not yet learned the truth.
- I am conflicted between the second and third options.
- I believe God created humanity with a diversity of genders and expressions that cannot be reduced to rigid binaries. Gender is a complex interplay of biology, identity, culture, and spirit, and all gender identities (including transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid) reflect the image of God. To deny or suppress someone's gender identity/expression is to reject part of God's creative work. Faithfulness to Jesus calls us to affirm people fully in their lived gender, using their names and pronouns, and to welcome them into every aspect of the Church's life and ministry. This affirmation is not accommodation but discipleship, rooted in love, truth-telling, and justice.
- I left the ECC to attend an open and affirming denomination so that I would not have to worry about this question.

**Non-affirming**

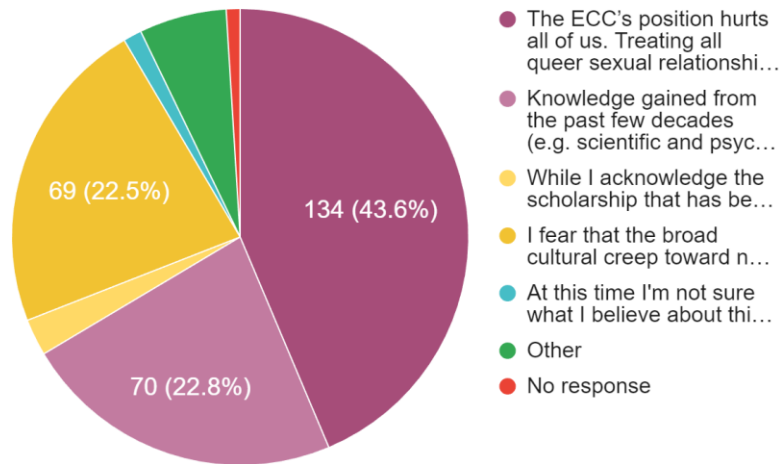
- ECC pastors should not be permitted to officiate. I do think there is a distinction between state/socially defined marriage and Biblical marriage. The ECC has the right as a covenant of members to define the terms of that covenant.

- Pastors in the ECC should not be permitted to officiate at same-sex unions, blessings, or marriages, under any circumstances--if for no other reason than that we have signed an Ethical Code that said that we wouldn't. But again, if same-sex/same-gendered unions are in fact sinful, we should refrain from performing them whether we've signed anything or not.

#### Unclear

- As a pastor I have agreed to be under the care and guidance of the larger church, and for now there is no permission to officiate same-sex unions. I am free to leave the church and join any number of other denominations that do permit it. Likewise my congregation is free to leave the denomination without fear of repercussion if they choose this is an issue worth withdrawing over.
- Not sure, but not ambivalent.

Question #4: Which statement most closely matches your perspective on the ECC's position on human sexuality as communicated by the [Resolution on Human Sexuality \(1996\)](#)?



- The ECC's position hurts all of us. Treating all queer sexual relationships as inherently broken and sinful undermines our Christian witness and does violence to the Gospel. God is calling on the Church to repent over its exclusion of sexual minorities and to reform harmful language and practices. It is time for the ECC to change its guidelines to align with the prophetic movement that is calling for the full inclusion and affirmation of queer people. – **43.6%**
- Knowledge gained from the past few decades (e.g. scientific and psychological research, theology and biblical studies, personal experience with queer people, etc.) has challenged my own understanding of human sexuality and its intersection with Christian ethics. Queer inclusion has caused division in our denomination, and we ignore it at our own peril. It is time right now for our polity at the denominational, conference, and congregational levels to intentionally listen, study, discern God's calling, and reevaluate the current position. – **22.8%**
- While I acknowledge the scholarship that has been done pointing to a more inclusive posture towards queer relationships, I remain unconvinced of those conclusions. I do not view this as an issue that currently requires deeper reflection or debate and believe that ECC pastors and leaders should continue to adhere to current policies. I could be convinced of reevaluating those policies if there was widespread support among the ministerium. – **2.6%**
- I fear that the broad cultural creep toward normalization and acceptance of homosexual relationships is undermining the clear biblical teaching on acceptable sexual behavior. Queer sexuality is sinful and damages our relationship with God. The ECC should remain set apart from the world and hold firmly to the accepted position on human sexuality as only being valid within the confines of a marriage between one man and one woman. – **22.5%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **1.3%**
- Other – **6.2%**
- No response – **1.0%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- I mostly agree w the first choice here, but would add the real issue at hand is not sexuality- it's authority. And that's been co-opted since 2019 and woven tightly to whiteness and patriarchal leadership commitments. So, without addressing that core authority grab that happened, and has increasingly been centered and protected since 2019, I don't believe much can shift or be repaired.
- It should be a non-discussion, just like a person's income, favorite band, or hair color. It's just another way that humans exist that doesn't determine their value in God's kingdom. We are all equal, regardless of sexual orientation.
- My posture is between the 1st and 2nd options. If option #2 was phrased "Queer EXclusion has caused division..." I would concur with that.
- Now that I have left the Covenant, I fully embrace choice 1. While in the Covenant, I advocated for choice 2 and for congregations and pastors to choose how to handle these issues, similar to how the Covenant allow some churches to decide to not have women in their pulpit or even more important the practice of the sacrament of baptism. We can

agree to disagree on a sacrament and remain in fellowship but cannot see our way to allow for a sexual ethic that includes all.

- The ECC's 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality is theologically flawed and pastorally harmful. It imposes a double standard on queer people that is inconsistent with the gospel of Christ, which proclaims freedom, dignity, and belonging for all. Far from protecting biblical authority, the resolution narrows our reading of scripture and resists the Spirit's work of joining us across difference. I believe the ECC must repent of the exclusion, silencing, and trauma caused by this position and commit to a renewed identity rooted in love, justice, and full affirmation of 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings. Anything less compromises both our witness and our integrity.
- The ECC's position on human sexuality is garbage, of course, but it brings forth a larger issue: Freedom in Christ and the ECC's betrayal of Pietism. We're not majoring on the majors anymore - We're taking six verses in the bible and letting them tear apart a denomination whose credo used to be "Where is it written?" This was, hypothetically, able to respectfully leave room for a wide interpretation of beliefs within a body of believers, so long as they were faithful to their congregation and scripture. By declaring official interpretations of scripture like what was done in 1996, we've hindered the ability to have a living encounter with Christ.
- The ECC's resolution is an overreach on the congregational polity. Congregations should be allowed to discern God's will and act accordingly.
- The position in 1996, contextually, was more-or-less progressive at the time. To place a 2025 lens on a 1996 statement is a mistake. Would we place a 1990 lens on a 1960 statement on divorce or women in ministry? Surely not. We should consider it in its relevant context and update our position now 30 years later according to our progressive and inclusive history.

### Non-affirming

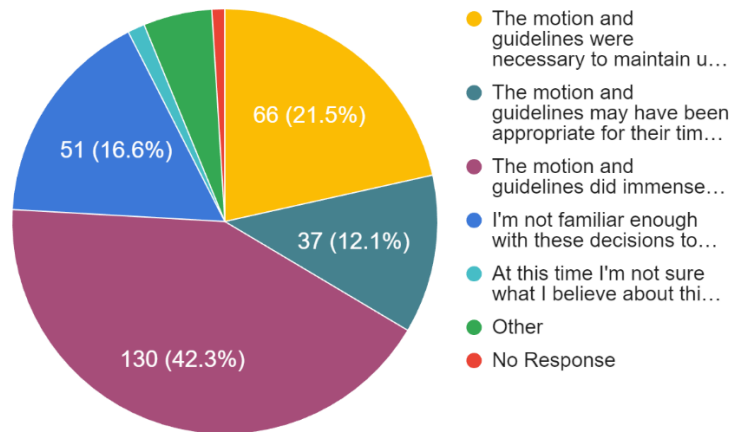
- I agree and affirm the discerned position is appropriate and correct. The policies of the ECC should come in compliance with the discerned position, and there is a posture that we should take that expresses love and affirm the shared image bearer of all humanity.
- I anticipated some bias based on the email I read, but this question and its prompts significantly reveals that bias, in my opinion. The first two options are phrased very positively. The third option that acknowledges scholarship seems to be the author's attempt at framing this perspective as "I hear you, but I'm stubborn." I most resonate with that perspective, but I would phrase it more like this: While I acknowledge the scholarship that has been done pointing to a more inclusive posture towards queer relationships, I remain convinced that the biblical standard for marriage and sexuality is for fidelity in heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness. I also acknowledge the hurt the church (broadly, not just the ECC) has inflicted on LGBTQ+ communities. The ECC needs a deeper reflection on how to lovingly disciple LGBTQ+ communities while maintaining fidelity to Scripture's standards regarding marriage and sexuality.
- I believe that the Bible is very clear that same-sex relationships are not God's will. Pastors, as ones who teach, defend and exemplify the teachings of scripture should not give in to societal or relational pressures. They should simply defer to the clear teaching of scripture, and say, "I cannot perform a marriage ceremony that is not condoned by the word of God." I would hope that the ECC remains clear and firm in this regard.
- I fear that the broad cultural creep toward normalization and acceptance of homosexual relationships is undermining the clear biblical teaching on acceptable sexual behavior. Sexuality outside of marriage context is sinful and damages our relationship with God. The ECC should remain set apart from the world and hold firmly to the accepted position on human sexuality as only being valid within the confines of a marriage between one man and one woman.
- I'm good with the current stance.
- I'm somewhere between options B, C and D. To clarify, I think we should always be open to reevaluating policies if it is in light of a better understanding of scripture. I always want to humbly remain open to that on any issue. Theologically, I remain convinced that marriage is a sacrament that by design requires sexual difference (i.e., Christ and the Church are not the same). That said, I would like to see our wording on our "discerned position" and on our "resolution of human sexuality" be updated to something much more in line with resources and pastoral papers by the Center of Faith, Sexuality, and Gender. Also, Park Hills Church San Diego (Evan Wickham) has in my humble opinion the best wording on a compelling theology of marriage. That said, I want to empower LGBTQ+ followers of Jesus in all areas of ministry and church fellowship if they commit to celibacy in singleness and heterosexual monogamy in marriage.
- While I acknowledge the scholarship that has been done pointing to a more inclusive posture towards queer relationships, I remain unconvinced of those conclusions. I do not view this as an issue that currently requires deeper reflection or debate and believe that ECC pastors and leaders should continue to adhere to current policies.

### Unclear

- Again, problematic statement options.

- I appreciate the document and believe it to be generally positive. However, I also believe the document falls short of acknowledging our LGBTQ+ siblings and how we can remain in fellowship with those who are not in harmony with the document.
- I don't see a lot of people changing their minds one way or the other. The church continues to allow congregations from other denominations to join, some of which are drawn by the current ECC stance on these issues. I don't see the official stance changing for a good while -- perhaps a generation. I think they have been clear about their stance since 1996, so I am left wondering why so much energy is devoted to changing it when a majority don't want to have the conversation.
- Mostly the first position, but also the ECC has focused so much on the non-heterosexual aspects of the position to the exclusion of teachings on abusive relationships, which have a high prevalence starting in teenage years, definitely occur in the church setting, and for years have been managed in very unhealthy ways. There are more issues around human sexuality than the perceived gender of the partners, and I fear that the ECC's haste to focus on the perceived sin of one group of "other" has permitted unhealthy and unbiblical positions on safety in intimate relationships, leading to continued blame and shame where it does not belong.

Question #5: Which statement most closely matches your perspective on the [motion from the 119th Annual Meeting](#) (2004, see the bottom of page 2) and the subsequent [Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality \(2015\)](#)?



- The motion and guidelines were necessary to maintain unity about how Covenant ministers and churches should be treating the issue of same-sex marriage in ways that align with the denomination's discerned position on human sexuality. – **21.5%**
- The motion and guidelines may have been appropriate for their times, but changes in the ECC demand that we reevaluate these decisions. – **12.1%**
- The motion and guidelines did immense harm to the Covenant by constricting our policies to a narrowed view of sexual ethics, for which there is not unanimity. – **42.3%**
- I'm not familiar enough with these decisions to have a strong opinion. – **16.6%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **4.3%**
- Other – **1.5%**
- No response – **0.3%**

*Other Responses:*

#### Affirming

- I didn't even know that happened.
- I left the ECC to not get into these details. They need to be attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit as noted on the previous question.
- The 2004 motion and 2015 guidelines inflicted profound harm by codifying exclusion into the life of the Covenant. They replaced our pietist heritage of freedom in Christ and respect for diverse convictions with a rigid policy that silenced dissent, delegitimized queer lives, and disciplined pastors who sought to minister faithfully. Rather than preserving unity, these decisions fractured trust, drove out beloved congregations, and betrayed our witness to the radical hospitality of the gospel. I believe they should be rescinded, and that the ECC must return to a posture of humility, discernment, and inclusion where all members (queer and straight alike) can fully belong.
- The 2004 motion I'm largely ambivalent about. It probably was just forecasting the demographic changes in the Covenant. The 2015 guidelines are a direct affront to our history and polity and, frankly, they violate the very essence of what it is to be Covenant.
- The motion and guidelines did violence to the LGBTQ+ community and those who love them. It must be changed. How can God's people close the doors on those God loves?
- The procedural practices in both 1996 and 2004 were flawed due to their rush, their ignoring of standing rules, and in the case of 2004, the lack of follow-through on an exploratory paper that includes dissenting positions. The spirit of the conversations was lacking grace, and our staunch refusal to reexamine non-essential positions has turned thoughts on marriage into a litmus test for orthodoxy. There are ways to remedy these things, but we have yet to have the courage to have an honest and open conversation.
- The status quo vote on the guidelines essentially negates the motion at best, and at worst ignores it. So, I'm not sure what I'm being asked to comment on here.

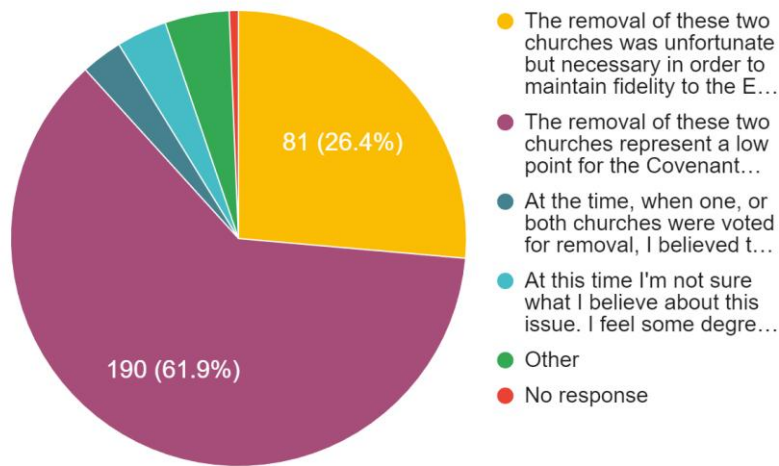
## Non-affirming

- <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>
- I have to start skipping questions with extra reading because this is getting too long.
- No need for change.
- The motion was Biblical and represented the views of a large majority of the ECC. If people disagreed they should have already left.
- The motion was necessary because members of the ministerium were embracing and acting on a revisionist theology of human sexuality. In recent years MANY of our 'side A' ministerium members have been opting out and clarity on the ECC's embrace of the historic biblical sexual ethic should eventually allow us to remove the 2004 statement as a guide for practice because our theology will be aligned again and most if not all revisionist pastors will have left for credentialing bodies that are 'side A'.
- The motions are Biblically sound and therefore appropriate to adopt. No change is needed, nor should it be sought.
- We don't need human resolutions and motions. We need to follow what the Bible says

## Unclear

- I agree with #2. The ECC's Resolution is from 1996. That was different time when it comes to how society viewed sexuality - the "purging" was still happening as late as the early 1990s.
- Sorry, I don't have those in my head at the moment. I do like the idea of each pastor being able to carry their own convictions (such as with baptism) while at the same time agreeing to be under the guidance of the larger church. If it's too much of a dissonance, they can seek to change the rules (though that is a lengthy process) or find a church home that aligns with their convictions better. I, myself, had to leave a denomination to join this one over theological and ecclesiastical practice. It was a bit jarring, but I am much happier here. I know it may sound a bit off-putting to say, "well someone can just leave" but it's something I have done myself and I found peace in it. I wish that peace for anyone.

**Question #6:** Which statement most closely matches your perspective on the involuntary removal of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis in 2019 and Awaken Church in 2023 from the roster of Evangelical Covenant Churches.



- The removal of these two churches was unfortunate but necessary in order to maintain fidelity to the ECC's policies, resolutions, and guidelines. Should any other churches be found in violation of the ECC's policies in the future, and are unwilling to withdraw, they should also be subject to discipline and removal. – **26.4%**
- The removal of these two churches represent a low point for the Covenant and constitute a betrayal of our collective affirmation of "freedom in Christ". – **61.9%**
- At the time, when one, or both churches were voted for removal, I believed that it was the correct, necessary decision, but since that time I've come to believe that the ECC made a mistake, and I wish that we had found a way to live in harmony with congregations that have divergent views. – **2.9%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **3.6%**
- Other – **4.6%**
- No response – **0.7%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- I mostly agree with choice 2 here. I would add that this decision cracked the foundations of the denomination in spiritual and relational and practical ways. The cost of it has not really been named or dealt with, because of pain, denial, anxiety, and fear.
- If this was related to their policies on sexuality and gender, I'd say it was a low point.
- I don't know anything about this.
- The removals of First Covenant Minneapolis and Awaken Church were acts of injustice that revealed the ECC's fear of diversity rather than its trust in Christ. These decisions betrayed our stated commitment to freedom in Christ and did deep harm to queer people, their families, and countless others who long for a church that embodies radical hospitality. Far from protecting unity, these expulsions fractured the body of Christ and undermined our witness to the gospel of reconciliation. I believe the ECC must repent of these actions, restore relationships where possible, and reimagine our life together in ways that fully affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings.

**Non-affirming**

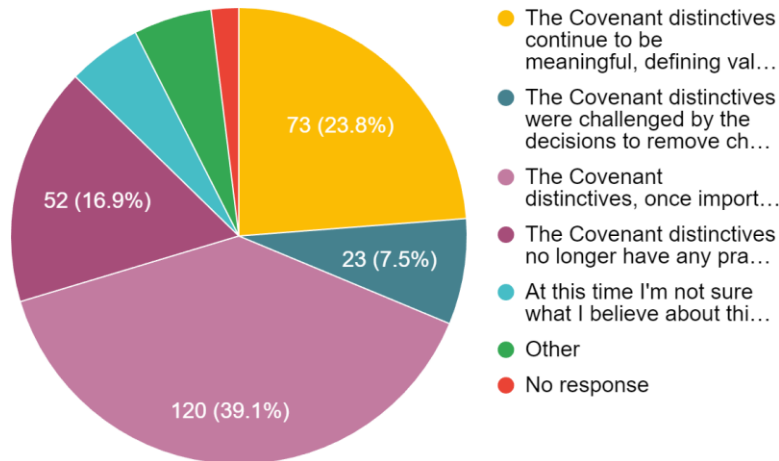
- I grieve the removal of the churches. But more so I grieve that we have been told the only way to love someone is to accept all of their faults and sins. This is the core of the issue and is antithetical to life with Christ. While I invite the freedom of choice of our country and individuals, that freedom is not the narrow path. When a church chooses to put personal feelings above scripture they compromise the heart of "freedom IN CHRIST." In the USA we have freedom to choose far more good and negative things, but to choose Christ involves conforming ourselves to his standard. This is a standard which has only been argued from a perspective of social justice and not scripture.

- If a church doesn't agree with the ECC's position on gender and sexuality, it makes sense they would voluntarily leave without hard feelings. When it gets to the point of involuntary removal, I wonder why they didn't just leave on their own a lot sooner if they made up their mind about their convictions/theological conclusions and those differed from the ECC. There are lots of good reasons to leave a denomination, and this could be one of them for some churches.
- Removal of churches that reject the clear teaching of the bible is a grievous necessity.
- The removal of these churches was necessary, mainly due to their unwillingness to permit their pastors to be disciplined by the Board of Ordered Ministry.
- Why bother removing them when the denomination is doing what they think is right in their own eyes? Doesn't that give every church and pastor the right to do what they think is right in their own eyes? If you aren't going to lead with Biblical principles, don't expect the churches and pastors to.

#### Unclear

- A mixture of the first and second responses. I am more familiar with the FCCM situation, and I am aware that there were personality and behavioral issues that included and went beyond the church, its pastor, the ECC, and the BOOM.
- I don't feel "ambivalent" but I am not sure what I think. I am not familiar enough with how this process happened. I am saddened by it though.
- I don't know enough about these specific instances to have an informed opinion
- I think these situations are too complex to fit into any of the above categories. Though I do lament that these actions were taken.
- The method was flawed and divisive; should have been handled differently.

**Question #7:** The Evangelical Covenant Church has adopted a list of "distinctives" as part of its ecclesial identity, consisting of "We are..." statements, including "...*evangelical* but not *exclusive*," "...*biblical* but not *doctrinaire*," and "...*traditional* but not *rigid*." In light of the tightening of guidelines on sexuality and the subsequent decisions to disfellowship churches and remove the ordination of pastors, what is your perspective on the Covenant distinctives?



- The Covenant distinctives continue to be meaningful, defining values of the ECC. The decisions to bind the 1996 resolution and to involuntarily remove churches were made by the collective action of the Annual Meeting, and therefore represent the will of the broader denomination to maintain adherence to biblicism and tradition. – **23.8%**
- The Covenant distinctives were challenged by the decisions to remove churches over divergent views on human sexuality. Overall, they are still meaningful orientation points for our denomination, but the involuntary removal of churches does somewhat trouble this narrative. – **7.5%**
- The Covenant distinctives, once important points of orientation for our denomination, were deeply violated when we started voting out churches over differing views on sexuality. A return to those key values would require, at the very least, a commitment to hold space for differing viewpoints on sexuality and to no longer discipline congregations over the same. – **39.1%**
- The Covenant distinctives no longer have any practical meaning in the wake of the involuntary removal of churches. Those decisions now qualify the ECC as exclusive, doctrinaire, and rigid. A return to a denomination-wide affirmation of those distinctives will be fraught and may not be possible in the near term. – **16.9%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **5.2%**
- Other – **5.5%**
- No response – **2.0%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- Again - left the ECC
- I didn't know about these.
- I left the Cov 23 years ago because of bullying my kids. I tried going back after our son came out and was only met with drama and rudeness. My husband's church has many queer people in it and it seems very progressive and NOT traditional ECC, for which I'm glad. But too much religious trauma for me. I'm done.
- I think along the lines of option 4 above - that the distinctives no longer have meaning. However, my hope is that they are still aspirational.
- Not aware of this.
- The Covenant distinctives were meant to safeguard freedom in Christ and resist narrow doctrinal control, but the enforcement of the 1996 resolution and the removal of churches and pastors have hollowed them out. By disciplining congregations over human sexuality, the ECC contradicted its own claim to be evangelical but not exclusive, biblical but not doctrinaire, and traditional but not rigid. These values cannot simply be claimed while our actions deny them. For the

distinctives to regain integrity, the ECC must repent of exclusion, recommit to holding space for theological diversity, and embody love and justice in ways that include 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings as full members of Christ's body.

- The ECC should never have had directives. The denomination was founded on discussion, listening, and loving. A directive likens a creed, which is not needed.

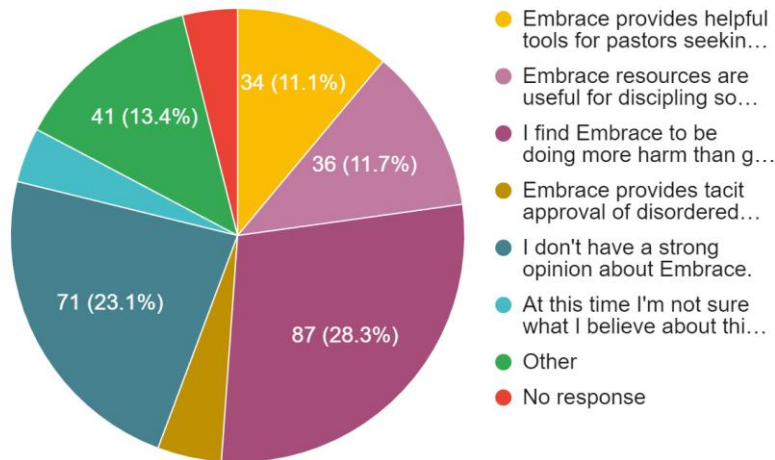
### Non-affirming

- ECC's lack of a clear doctrinal statement is dangerous. We must obey all of the Word of God and stop functionally deleting portions of the Bible.
- One of the distinctives is about the centrality of Scripture. Scripture is clear (in my opinion, though I understand this is debated) about sexual ethics. Freedom in Christ, as a distinctive, does not overrule Scriptural standards. Thus, churches or clergy that are out of alignment of Scripture should voluntarily remove themselves if they are unwilling to abide by the distinctives of the ECC.
- Perhaps we need a more robust definition for what it means to be "biblical but not doctrinaire". Should we be open to changing our perspectives if it is in light of a better reading of scripture? Absolutely! Christians have changed their mind on a whole host of issues such as slavery, and women in ministry leadership (thank God!) because there is trajectory one can follow from the OT, to the Gospels, to the NT (i.e., a better reading of scripture). However, that same trajectory is not there when it comes to marriage. What the OT says, is repeated by Jesus in the Gospels, and then again in the NT. While I remain open to seeing the trajectory in scripture, I remain unconvinced that there really is one when it comes to the topic of marriage between one man and one woman.
- The Covenant distinctives are not meaningful, defining values of the ECC. They are just clumsy imprecise words. The decisions to bind the 1996 resolution and to involuntarily remove churches were made by the collective action of the Annual Meeting, and therefore represent the will of the broader denomination to maintain adherence to biblicism and tradition.
- The Covenant distinctives used to be "where is it written" and our nickname the readers. Now it is "go with the flow of the world" so there is nothing substantially different from the Covenant than any other denomination that has taken this path

### Unclear

- A combination of 2 and 3 above.
- All of the above? The first 4 options are not exclusive to the others, and all have some truth in them.
- I have not heard of the distinctives before.
- The Covenant Distinctives are case applicable as in the wording.
- Unfortunately saying "we are Biblical" only means what the latest incarnation of the collective understanding thinks is Biblical. But this is where we are. A majority of the delegates to the annual meetings have been unswayed by arguments that scripture tells the church to be affirming. The best compromise, in my view, is the "Side B" interpretation, which seems deeply thoughtful and purposely committed to living with parts of scripture that are challenging or limit us. And really, aren't there a lot of parts of scripture that do that, even outside of questions of sexuality and orientation? Greed, honesty, compassion, justice... all areas where I need scripture's word spoken into my life.

Question #8: Which statement most closely matches your perspective on the ECC's *Embrace* resources on Human Sexuality?



- Embrace provides helpful tools for pastors seeking to disciple LGBTQ+ congregants in a healthy manner that is consistent with the ECC's sexual ethic. – 11.7%
- Embrace resources are useful for discipling some members of the LGBTQ+ community, and their families, but should be expanded to include more diverse perspectives that honor affirming viewpoints. – 11.7%
- I find Embrace to be doing more harm than good in promoting an untenable posture toward the LGBTQ+ community. Embrace should either be overhauled to extend affirmation to all queer members of our churches, or should be removed. – 28.3%
- Embrace provides tacit approval of disordered and sinful identities and should more clearly promote exchanging these identities for Biblical expressions of sexuality. – 4.6%
- I don't have a strong opinion about Embrace. – 23.1%
- At this time, I'm not sure what I believe about this issue. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – 3.9%
- Other – 13.4%
- No response – 3.9%

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- As of 2020, I would have opted for the second or third option. I have not followed further developments but I fear they may have gotten worse, considering the trajectory of the denomination at that time.
- Don't know the material.
- Embrace has failed to move the conversation beyond one story and/or perspective. Our continued reliance on one resource and one story hinders our ability to understand the mosaic of experience that people in our congregations and communities possess. In general, Embrace does an OK job of introducing people who have never thought about LGBTQ people in churches to the reality that exists, but does little beyond that. That particular resource felt old and stretched 10 years ago and has remained largely unchanged in the last decade.
- Embrace has helpful elements - but I have experienced pushback from many of the resources for even those being too liberal (i.e. recommendations for hospitality around pronoun usage, housing for trans campers on retreats, etc.).
- Embrace is a symptom of a wider move by the Covenant ministerium and denominational governance toward inflicting abuse of all kinds (including spiritual abuse) on members without accountability or consequence. The ECC is deeply sick and hurting many people in addition to LGBTQ+ people and their allies.
- I am no longer a member of ECC and am unfamiliar with this.
- I am not familiar with Embrace.
- I can't have a meaningful opinion on this resource as I am not familiar with it.
- I don't know what Embrace is.
- I don't know what Embrace teaches to be honest, never looked at it, but given who wrote it I would guess it's largely harmful - but that may be unfair without reading it. Its stance on sexuality is not clear at least I can say.

- I have never heard of Embrace.
- I have not spent enough time looking at Embrace resources to be able to state an opinion. To my knowledge, my church/pastors have not used this resource.
- I know of the resources but have not read them. Therefore, I am not qualified to evaluate the materials with respect to my personal views on sexuality.
- I know what Embrace is, but I don't have detailed knowledge of its content.
- I think we should be affirming of the LGBTQ community.
- I'm not familiar with Embrace.
- I'm not familiar.
- N/A
- Not aware of it.
- Not familiar with Embrace. (x2)
- The Embrace resources, while presented as compassionate, ultimately reinforce a posture of non-affirmation that causes harm to queer people and their families. By framing 2sLGBTQIA+ identity as something to be managed rather than fully celebrated, they undermine both pastoral care and Christian witness. Any resource that refuses to affirm the goodness of queer identity and relationships is complicit in exclusion and trauma. I believe true discipleship requires resources that affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ people as whole, beloved, and called by God, and Embrace falls short of that gospel vision.
- This is my first introduction to "Embrace". At a glance, I feel it is doing more harm than good.

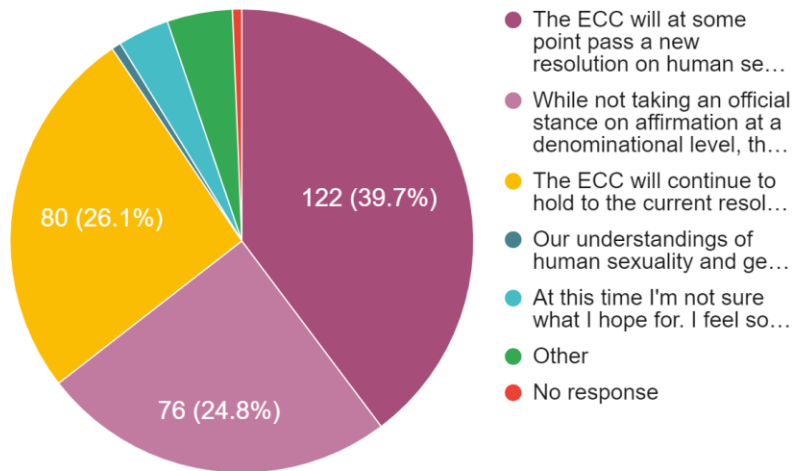
### Non-affirming

- I am not familiar enough with Embrace to answer this question.
- I am not familiar enough with the materials.
- I am not familiar with Embrace. I do feel we need to find ways to love all Christians the way Jesus would love them showing grace, mercy, and compassion but at the same time not caving into accepting beliefs or ways of life that are contrary to God's word just because of changes in public perception of varying lifestyles. Jesus forgave the women at the well but told her to go and sin no more.
- I am not familiar with this.
- I do not know about "Embrace." We are to lovingly (as Christ did) speak the truth to sinners. We can obey God's Word and love people without "embracing" their sin. Jesus clearly said, "Go and sin no more." We should do the same in love!
- I find these resources to be well curated and incredibly helpful.
- I have not reviewed enough of the Embrace resources to form an opinion, but from what I can see I think that is a step closer to "Affirming" than I am comfortable with.
- Never heard of or used Embrace.
- Not familiar enough to respond.

### Unclear

- Don't know this material.
- Embrace is unknown to me.
- I didn't know it existed and would have to read very carefully.
- I don't know enough about the program, but if there's any judgement towards the people being counseled, it needs to be overhauled.
- I have no first-hand knowledge or experience of Embrace, but have heard that it is damaging and not helpful.
- I have no knowledge of Embrace.
- I have not heard of the Embrace resources before, so I don't know anything about what they say.
- I'm not familiar with it.
- Not familiar enough with Embrace to choose a position

Question #9: What do you hope will be the long-term trajectory of the ECC regarding queer inclusion and affirmation?



- The ECC will at some point pass a new resolution on human sexuality that affirms the validity of same-sex marriage and relationships as having equal moral status at opposite-sex relationships as well as honoring the dignity of transgendered persons. – **39.7%**
- While not taking an official stance on affirmation at a denominational level, the ECC will end its current policy of discipline and removal of pastors and congregations whose ministry to queer persons leads them to blessing marriages, effectively allowing the matter of affirmation to be decided on a church-by-church basis. – **24.8%**
- The ECC will continue to hold to the current resolution on human sexuality and take disciplinary action against pastors and congregations that go against it. – **26.1%**
- Our understandings of human sexuality and gender will prove to be so divisive that they will lead to a denominational split. – **0.7%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I hope for. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **3.6%**
- Other – **4.6%**
- No response – **0.7%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- I hope the ECC gets their shit together and moves away from their simultaneously egalitarian & homophobic/transphobic views and has a change of heart. I hope ECC leaders repent, confess, and atone for what they've done to the churches, pastors, and congregants they've cut from the body. I hope we rejoin, forgive, and move on.
- I hope the ECC goes bankrupt and ceases to exist, since it has fully adopted white nationalist principles.
- I hope the ECC will repent of the harm it has done to queer people and reclaim its pietist roots of freedom in Christ by embracing full affirmation. My prayer is that the denomination I once called home not only ends policies of exclusion and discipline but actively celebrates queer identity and relationships as gifts of God. The long-term trajectory I desire is for the ECC to become a community where queer and trans siblings are seen as central to the witness of the gospel, shaping a church marked by justice, love, and kinship. Anything less falls short of the Spirit's call.
- I left the Covenant in 2022 after 24 years and have joined a fully affirming congregation with many members who claim a letter (lgbtq+ia). It is so nice to not have to spend one more ounce of energy on this issue. The Covenant's stance does not bear good fruit, in my opinion, and is based in fear. I am grateful to no longer be a part of the harm and sad that the Covenant could not live into the potential of their claimed distinctives.
- I prefer 1, but 2 would be a huge step forward.
- I'm no longer part of the ECC. I have moved on to openly, enthusiastically affirming faith space (ELCA).
- It's not a hope. The ECC will either affirm LGBTQ individuals or functionally cease to exist by the year 2050. It's not even a question of hope. I suppose I HOPE we choose to exist rather than die.
- Selection 1 would be my long term hope, but I would welcome answer 2 in the meantime.

- The ECC will ask forgiveness for the great harm it has caused to so many queer Covenanters who have left the Covenant and the church and feel harm was done by the church to them. They officially publicly make amends and pass a new resolution

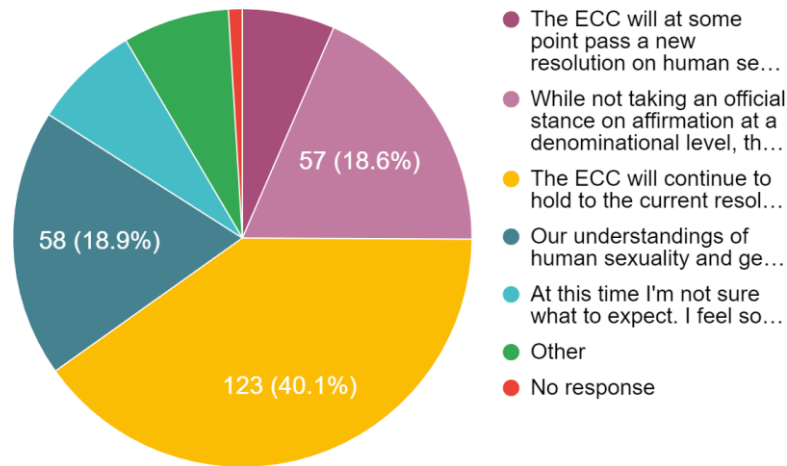
### Non-affirming

- I hope that the ECC will maintain what it genuinely believes is a Biblical position, but continue in dialogue together to best understand how to live out Biblical values in ways that respect and demonstrate grace to a culture that has been damaged by distortions and toxic applications of those Biblical truths that showed hatred instead of love.
- I hope the Covenant repents and returns to the Biblical values that it started with.
- My hope is that the ECC maintains their conviction on what marriage is, while being deeply committed to Embrace. I have no hope for discipline or denominational split, but it makes sense for church communities who no longer hold to the discerned position to part ways from the denomination, while maintaining amicable relations with the ECC. This is basically what [redacted], has done in the [redacted] Conference. They did not try to get the denomination to align with their views, but rather realized that their views no longer aligned with the ECC's and therefore in good conscience have decided not to renew their ministry licenses with the ECC.

### Unclear

- Allowing further discussion and a different process.
- With all the brokenness of American Christianity and the infiltration of Christian Nationalism into the Covenant, I don't know what I hope for anymore.

Question #10: What do you expect will be the long-term trajectory of the ECC regarding queer inclusion and affirmation?



- The ECC will at some point pass a new resolution on human sexuality that affirms the validity of same-sex marriage and relationships as having equal moral status at opposite-sex relationships as well as honoring the dignity of transgendered persons. – **6.5%**
- While not taking an official stance on affirmation at a denominational level, the ECC will end its current policy of discipline and removal of pastors and congregations whose ministry to queer persons leads them to blessing marriages, effectively allowing the matter of affirmation to be decided on a church-by-church basis. – **18.6%**
- The ECC will continue to hold to the current resolution on human sexuality and take disciplinary action against pastors and congregations that go against it. – **40.1%**
- Our understandings of human sexuality and gender will prove to be so divisive that they will lead to a denominational split. – **18.9%**
- At this time, I'm not sure what I expect. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement. – **7.5%**
- Other – **7.5%**
- No response – **1.0%**

*Other Responses:*

**Affirming**

- I expect that, as it continues to remove members holding historical ECC values, the ECC will be absorbed into political evangelicalism and openly participate in the attempt to turn the US into a theocracy.
- I expect the ECC will continue to experience fractures as long as it holds to exclusionary policies, and that more churches will choose to leave rather than comply. Over time, the denomination will be forced either to reckon with the Spirit's call to full affirmation or to diminish into an increasingly narrow and rigid body. While I cannot predict the exact outcome, I believe queer people will remain part of the Covenant regardless, and their presence and witness will ultimately reshape the denomination, whether from within or beyond its formal structures.
- I left the ECC for its harmful and narrowed view on God's people and haven't looked back.
- I think both the current resolution will stand, and disciplinary action will be taken against pastors and congregations. More congregations and pastors will leave voluntarily rather than facing discipline. Unfortunately, there isn't a critical enough mass of churches to form a denomination, though some kind of loose affiliation of churches might form.
- It depends on who stays in leadership. Right now, there's a stronghold of those who reject LGBTQ people. Maybe that will change, but I doubt it.
- It seems as though the denominational goal is uniformity over unity, and dissenting voices, be they pastoral or congregational, will quietly leave until there are no dissenting voices remaining.
- No expectations.
- Not sure. I'm not following it that closely anymore. But I HOPE and PRAY for answer #1.
- The denomination will split or fold.
- The ECC will continue to hold the current resolution, and it will ultimately end in a fracturing of the denomination.

- The ECC will continue to hold the current resolution, resulting in more and more mass exodus from the denomination, creating a shell version of what was once a more truly beautiful mosaic of faithful followers of Jesus who were "better together".
- They will split or slowly die as more and more people view Christian churches like this as hating people and not accepting and more young people leave.

### Non-affirming

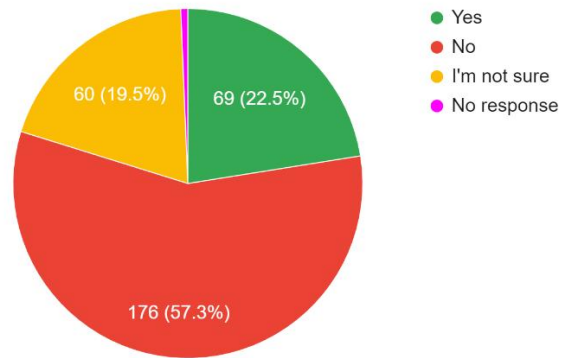
- I genuinely don't know what to expect will happen.
- It's a leading & unfair question seeking your favored response.
- No idea, but I don't feel ambivalent.
- The "Affirming" wing of the ECC will continue to push and push until it gains enough support to pass a resolution affirming same-sex marriage and relationships as having equal moral status as heterosexual ones.
- The first bullet, and I, as well as the church I serve, will leave the denomination.

### Unclear

- A combination of 3 and 4 above.
- As the Covenant continues to hold to our position, we will slowly lose the progressive-leaning members of our denomination, not in a split but in a dissolution. This will make us even more conservative, and we will adjust accordingly. There is not enough energy behind the affirming side to split into 2 groups - progressives would rather go join another group than destroy the ECC.
- I feel probably the Denomination will hold its ground. I don't know what that looks like for each conference. The [redacted] conference for example, may tend to lean a different way and I don't know what that will mean for the denominational relationship. I also feel like any conference stance change would be a long way off. If the denomination is on a trajectory of change, that will be a very long way off. There could be a lot of division as we wait for it and in the wake of it.
- Prayerfully hopeful. Not ambivalent.
- The ECC will collapse from factors unrelated to LGBT inclusion.
- This issue as well as others currently under debate will likely lead to a diminished ECC if not a split.

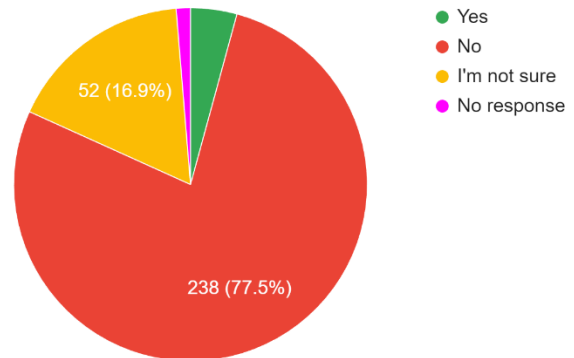
Question #11: Is the ECC, on the whole, a safe place for LGBTQ+ people?

- Yes – 22.5%
- No – 57.3%
- I'm not sure – 19.5%
- No response – 0.7%



Question #12: Is the ECC, on the whole, a safe place for LGBTQ-affirming pastors?

- Yes – 4.2%
- No – 77.5%
- I'm not sure – 16.9%
- No response – 1.3%



Question #13: \*OPTIONAL\* Referring to the previous two questions, what does "safe" mean to you?

Responses:

#### LGBTQ+ Voices

- "Safe" means I can be my authentic self in church. It means my husband or partner and I can attend and fully participate in church life without judgment, gossip, or consternation from anyone else about us or our relationship. "Safe" means that the church welcomes us to contribute my gifts for the benefit and building up believers, regardless of our sexual orientation and our relationship as spouses or partners, including leadership.
- A place without institutional or interpersonal reprisals for holding affirming views or being 2SLGBTQIA+, where any such action by leaders, members, etc. is held accountable.
- Ability to minister and worship as one's whole self and with one's full family, without fear of recrimination.
- Able to exist without fear of reprisal or harm.
- Accepting, non-judgmental, and affirming.
- An environment where it can be reasonably expected to avoid most physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual harms (at least as it relates to being LGBTQ/affirming).
- Being respected in their entirety and not subject to "love the sinner, hate the sin" mentality.
- Being safe means to have the ability to worship as oneself without fear of verbal or physical violence.
- Being welcomed and honored within your community context as your whole self, however you are experiencing and exploring your sense of self at any given time.
- Freedom from harm.

- Fully inclusive and affirming of queer people and those who affirm and include queer people.
- Honesty. Integrity.
- I feel safe at my specific church because of the many affirming individuals in my congregation and because the pastoral staff have my back regardless of their personal hang ups about LGBTQ+ individuals. I am uncertain I would feel safe at all ECC churches and frankly I don't know how any affirming pastor could possibly feel safe in a denomination that has taken action against affirming pastors.
- I think safe means being able to be present in church as your full self (which is often not attainable for non-queer members too!).
- It means you won't lose your job on the basis of your heterosexuality or norm heterosexuality if employed by an ECC church, and it means not having your options for church inclusion and blessing limited solely on the basis of your sexuality either.
- Not toxic. A place here you are accepted fully as a whole person and don't have to hide in the closet or be judged. A place where you are not going to be fired or separated for your very identity.
- Safe means accepted as no different than any other member.
- You will not lose friendships or invitations into ministry by discussing queerness.
- As a Side B LGBTQ+ pastor myself, I have thus far felt safe in the ECC in the sense that I don't believe I will lose my current job and I have been welcomed with open arms by my congregation and conference. I am fully out in all my life contexts. If/when I search for new roles at other ECC churches, I do not know if identifying as gay will be a deal-breaker or will otherwise hinder opportunities for me. I know that my experience so far may not be universal to the denomination. As for affirming pastors... I'm not one, so I can't say.
- It would mean that I could bring my non-gender-conforming child to church (or other settings with ECC friends/family) and not worry about being questioned, confronted, or "prayed for" in a way that implies my child is sinful for the way they experience or express their gender. I definitely don't have clarity on the topic of gender writ large — but I do know that a lot of people in the ECC believe they do and that my child is on the wrong side of it.

### Affirming

- "Safe" = personal acceptance, respectful treatment, and a lack of "disciplinary actions" for LGBTQ+ individuals and affirming pastors by non-affirming members and clergy.
- "Safe" for LGBTQ+ persons = embracing gender & sexual expression aligned with one's self-knowledge in consenting relationships; children are embraced for expressing their gender, however fluid. "Safe" for pastors = able to perform marriages, baptisms, and pastoral care to all LGBTQ+ persons without fear or possibility of losing their job, ordination, ministry level for doing so.
- "Safe" means being able to use one's own pastoral discernment about this topic without fear of being called before the Board of Ordered Ministry and, eventually, having credentials removed.
- "Safe" means the pastor does not just desire their church to be affirming, but able to act on that desire without discipline. For queer congregants, safe means full acceptance in all aspects of congregational life and ministry, and freedom from "disciplining" that requires them to renounce their sexuality.
- Safe means a place where one can be their full self.
- The pastor can preach, teach, lead, welcome and marry freely, exhibiting and expressing full support for LGBTQ+ people and theology without fear of discrimination, discipline or having their ordination revoked.
- Job security for affirming pastors and staff; equal treatment of members who seek leadership positions, etc.; wide open embrace of gay members and new attendees, etc.
- 100% loved and accepted in all areas.
- A pastor should not fear performing a same sex marriage.
- A place free from the fear of mental/emotional harm from judgmental words, actions, and behaviors relating to one's sexual orientation and gender identity. A place that fosters an affirming community and psychological safety.
- A place that is free from retribution or judgement.
- A place that will affirm them and their beliefs.
- A place where people can be themselves as God has so beautifully created them, with all rights as all other members. Where sexuality is no longer an "issue" and people can just BE, be married, serve, etc. Where LGBTQ+ people won't think they have to choose between their faith and who they are. Where LGBTQ+ people won't take theology taught and take their own lives over what it says about them. Where pastors aren't allowed to discriminate based on gender and sexuality against those who ask to be married. Where pastors and communities aren't kicked out over this. The ECC is deeply unsafe for LGBTQ+ people and affirming people. It's not worth it to stick around...there are so many more healthy communities where people will be and are not just affirmed but celebrated!!! It's scary to leave but worth it.
- A place where you can share your thoughts and convictions without fear of being ostracized or ignored.

- Able to honestly uphold our called ability to love others, particularly those in close relationship with us.
- Able to pursue ministry to LGBTQ community without fear of discipline or expulsion.
- Able to share & practice their affirming perspectives publicly without reprisal.
- Affirmed in their LGBT+ status, allowed to hold any roles within the church, such as volunteer work. Or for a pastor, being free to perform a ceremony for a same sex couple without losing license.
- Allowed to think, lead and pastor how they believe they should.
- Being safe in ministry means that we are free to discern and express our theological understandings of sexuality without being in fear of discipline or exclusion.
- Can be fully themselves (not have to hide) and not be in fear of repercussions, bullying, ostracizing, etc. in the church.
- Can I speak freely? Can I follow my own conscience? Can I be myself?
- ECC is feeling very, "don't ask, don't tell".
- Emotional and professional support from congregations and denominational leadership. The ability to engage fully as members of the body of Christ.
- Feeling accepted for who we are and not limited based on lived out sexual orientation.
- Following the guidance of the Holy Spirit and allowing churches to fully embrace members to be fully who they were created to be without shame, judgement, or repercussions.
- For pastors, safe means they have no fear of losing their job or ordination for their support of the LGBTQ+ community. For LGBTQ+ people, they are made to seem different, sinful, and wrong within the ECC and cannot be who God made them to be freely within church. This is unsafe.
- For the first question, full-affirmation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people is a basic necessity. For the second, I can concede that not performing a wedding would be an acceptable compromise, for now, but the fact that one can be brought before the Board of Ordered Ministry for praying at their OWN CHILD'S WEDDING, or those of other friends or loved ones, makes it inherently unsafe to be LGBTQ-affirming as a credentialed pastor in the ECC.
- Free from bias and judgment, and a space where individuals are loved and treated as equals.
- Fully accepted.
- Fully affirmed in expression and inclusion in community of faith at all levels.
- Having a fucking job. Being able to hold someone else's beliefs as true even if you disagree with them. Loving first, asking questions second.  
I was spiritually abused, fired, and made to sign an NDA when the head pastors of my church found out I [participated in a gay-inclusive organization].
- I believe that someone from the LGBTQ+ community can expect kindness from the members at my church should they ever take the risk of walking through our doors; BUT I don't see this as safe. "Safe" to me includes emotional safety. If I were in the LGBTQ+ community, I would never walk through the doors of a church that was not open and affirming because that would signal to me that they have not done their work to love and welcome all of me. At best, I think I might be tolerated and treated kindly but would never be able to be vulnerable and feel cherished- leading to the inability to have authentic relationships. I would brace myself for ignorant/uninformed comments and exclusionary policies. As a family member to a sibling who grew up in the church, I know that they couldn't and wouldn't put themselves in this kind of position as it would trigger past experiences of feeling unwanted, lesser-than, dirty, broken, and dangerous.
- I cannot speak openly or share information with some colleagues without being "marked" (targeted/watched) and unofficially disqualified or turned away from serving in leadership in the conference or denomination.
- I don't feel safe here pertains to actual 'acts of violence' but more so a place of belonging and ability to live their faith authentically.
- In the first question, safe means being respected and not judged. In the second question, it means being able to receive the same opportunities that non-affirming pastors would receive, and feeling confident that you will continue to have a job.
- Inclusive and fully affirming. Not a half-baked "all are welcome" approach that puts the onus on marginalized individuals to compromise in order to "fit-in".
- No fear of retaliatory measures from removal of membership/ordination, excommunication, silencing, bullying.
- One won't be judged or be made to feel ashamed in a safe place.
- Open and affirming.
- People can lose their jobs, be disciplined, be kicked out, etc. Others can't be open about their sexuality without sighing and sad smiles and sin being thought about in the background of their minds. Bleah.
- People should feel they can be wholly themselves, loved as children of God.
- Relational safety: Without significant risk of humiliation, rejection, or abandonment.

- Respected, comfortable, embraced, ability to be open about sexuality, not fearing discrimination, judgement, and damnation.
  - Room to speak freely without fear of retribution or consequences.
  - Safe = welcomed, celebrated, and included in sacraments and activities.
  - Safe for LGBTQI people means that they find love and acceptance for who they are and are loved accordingly. They are allowed and given the same rights and privileges that belong to heteronormative people.
  - Safe for the LGBTQ+ person means full acceptance. When we provide acceptance with limitations, we cause harm to people in the long term. Like the child who was loved in their home but only as much as they didn't speak up too often, or didn't get their clothes too dirty . . .
- Safe for the pastor means being able to pastor their congregants and community without disconnect between their beliefs and their actions.
- Safe means a place where one can be completely free to be in a healthy loving Christian relationship with anyone of their choosing.
  - Safe means accepted and finding a sense of belonging.
  - Safe means free from discrimination and retaliation. I believe some Cov Churches may be more or less safe for LGBTQ members, but pastors are not safe regardless of their willingness to adhere to the rules as outlined (as evidenced by my own story).
  - Safe means providing an environment or community where it is possible to express your position without fear of retaliation or consequences, and to find support for your viewpoint.
  - Safe means that anyone who wants to participate in the church and share the love of Christ can do so to whatever degree of honesty they feel compelled to do. The pastor has the freedom and safety to guide and bless all of his/her congregants as they truly are without concern for reprisal from the denomination.
  - Safe means that these individuals can bring their full selves without fear of physical, verbal or spiritual violence that is connected to their sexual or gender identity. And that if this kind of violence were to happen, that the work of repair and repentance would be done to restore safety.
  - Safe means welcoming, affirming, accepting and creating space that allows people to THRIVE.
  - Safe means you can live your life/carry out your work without fear you will be penalized for your identity.
  - Safe to me, in this context, means LGBTQ+ people will not be shamed and will be accepted as equals in ECC.
  - Safe would mean allowing individuals to live openly in their identity without fear of rejection. For pastors it would mean they'd be allowed to support and create a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals without fear of reprimand or expulsion.
  - Safe would mean people can be fully themselves. As a whole, that is not true for LGBTQ+ people and it is not true for affirming pastors who cannot love and serve their LGBTQ+ community members in the way they desire.
  - Safety means NOT being taught in church that God created you with an innate need for intimacy and partnership with another human, allowed for you to feel that desire for a person of your same gender, but withholds from you any way for you to fulfill that need in a holy way. God did not create us to hate us. Safety is being embraced for who you are, completely.
  - That ALL people are treated the same...with no restrictions. It's about loving Jesus and our neighbors.
  - That any member of the LGBTQ community feels welcome and not be considered a deviant but rather a valued member of the ECC community.
  - That people can come as they are and feel valued, recognized for the spiritual gifts they bring, not be judged for who they are.
  - That there are local churches where an LGBTQ person could be out, including a couple. They would not be attacked or shamed. However, safe might not mean being married by that pastor. I've had a gay couple tell me they felt safe and happy in the church, though they were confused as to why they couldn't be married there. Maybe "sad" is the better word. But not unsafe. As a pastor, I could foresee a situation where a person or persons come after me for being vocal about LGBTQ matters/people.
  - That's why I'm not sure. I can't prescribe what a safe place is for LGBTQ people, and as a pastor, I don't think the ECC is more or less safe than other denominations. Everywhere has their own messed up version of orthodoxy, us included. I don't like that this is ours, and it definitely can be difficult.
  - The ability to be fully public about one's own sexuality without fear of discipline or prejudice.
  - The freedom for people to live out the full expression of their beliefs as regards the LGBTQ community (within the construct of monogamy) without judgement, censure, rejection, or exclusion.
  - The freedom to be open about one's gender identity/sexual orientation without fear or threat of being blocked from serving or being kicked out.
  - There will be continued policing of leaders and churches on this one topic and without a significant prophetic change, repair, and restoration of healthy authority and expectations across culture, it will proceed unchecked even if much of the power it wields remains invisible- it's got roots now throughout our denom.

- They're usually treated fine from what I've seen.
- To be "safe," there needs to be more than mere tolerance but true belonging and belovedness.
- To be embraced and supported in all manner of church functions and sacraments including marriage.
- To be your authentic self.
- To me "safe" means that pastors are free to express their beliefs and parishioners are free to be open about who they are.
- Welcome, affirmed and accepted as beloved.
- Welcomed, embraced, engaged, offered leadership opportunities, offered opportunities in services (reading scripture, praying).
- Welcoming.
- Where the LGBTQ+ community can grow, flourish, be themselves, etc.
- You can openly be yourself without someone treating you negatively or looking down on you.
- You don't have to change who you are, to feel the love of Christ and His body.
- You'll not be accepted into the church community and, if you're a pastor, you'll be fired.
- Safe means being able to participate. Current pastors may not even participate in LGBTQ+ religious activities.

### Non-affirming

- A place where the person feels free to share who they are and still be loved.
- For people attending, a place extending God's truth and love, recognizing all have sinned and need salvation through faith in Jesus. Safe does not mean God allows us to continue in any sin. Safe does not mean God allows hypocrisy or false teaching.
- "Safe" means valued and supported in their pursuit of following Jesus. I think people struggling with gender dysphoria are still accepted and loved, but they should understand that following Jesus means leaving such dysphoria behind.
- A place where a person can expect the type of love that always does what is best for them, God's covenantal *hesed*, which may mean something done that a person doesn't like. LGBTQ people should always feel safe to come to the church and find the truth and the mercy and grace of God to give them new spiritual life transformed and transforming into the image of Christ. Pastors who promote and sin must also feel safe in the *hesed* sense, but that means discipline and correction for them. They shouldn't "feel" safe promoting sin in God's church.
- A place where anyone can be welcomed and supported. A place where everyone can hear God's word and teachings and implement them into their lives for the better. Straight, Gay, Queer, Bi, Trans.... White, Black, Asian.... all are sinners... all can benefit from the teachings of God. I find it rather odd that everyone gets so hung up on the hot topic of LGBTQ... but not on the masses of straight couples having pre-marital sex... seems off. I think sin from all groups and all persons (including myself) should be recognized equally.
- A place where they will be heard, but held accountable to God's truth. I think "safe" is thrown around in our culture to mean that people can speak freely with no accountability or expectation to align with agreed upon expectations or doctrine. Safe doesn't mean "without consequence for belief or action" it means you won't be physically harmed. We are allowed to disagree while also upholding the foundation ideologies we stand on. Love & safety does not mean condoning or agreeing with false or warped ideas/theology.
- A place where we are loved and disciples of Christ, being taught and disciplined in the Word of God.
- Affirming.
- All are welcome to services and ministry, but their lifestyle is not approved by the Bible.
- All sinners are welcome and should be supported in Love as they repent of their sins.
- At least in my congregation safe would mean that we will show love and compassion to all but that doesn't mean accepting a non-repenting lifestyle of any kind that goes against God's word.
- Being able to share pro LGBTQ stances without consequences.
- Coddling and Approving.
- Embraced well, even when not affirmed.
- From perspective of an LGBTQ+ person at our church, we would plan to treat them with love but we would not accept their lifestyle as acceptable. Whether they would feel safe is up to the individual. With respect to LGBTQ-affirming pastors, my opinion is that they should not feel secure in continuing in their role as pastor. If they insist on embracing the LGBTQ+ lifestyle as normal and acceptable and intend to perform same-sex marriages or unions they should be removed.
- Full membership and embrace for those seeking to live a righteous life within the parameters of our manner and form with regard to same sex union and gender identity.
- Great question, because I don't love the word. In the former question, I believe that the vast majority of ECC churches and certainly the denomination as a whole is welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. I have never heard of an instance of LGBTQ+ people being turned away or belittled. I think it's very important to distinguish between not welcoming people and not marrying people, that's a huge difference. Even the most hardline "side B" people in the ECC that I know are deeply loving and welcoming to everyone. In the latter question, I guess safe means, "Is it a safe place to hold credentialing?" Well, no, if

you intend to teach affirming theology or marry same-sex couples, your credentials are not safe in the ECC, nor should they be.

- He/she will receive no physical harm.
- I assume that both questions conflate "safe" with "affirmed and celebrated". This is not what it means to me, but I used that definition to answer the questions.
- I assume you're using it to mean, "something that's acceptable and not considered sinful".
- I believe "safe" to mean that they are loved, invited, heard, and empowered. I do not believe that affirming pastors are being faithful to the one ethic the Covenant has had since the beginning "where is it written?" This is the ethic that defines "freedom in Christ." As such it is not a "safe" place for those pastors because they are not holding up the core ethic to which they have affirmed. But every church should be a place for anyone to come in whatever state and receive the life transforming power of Jesus, not to affirm them, but to transform and sanctify them.
- I care for more about biblical, faithful, and obedient than safe.
- I don't believe the two questions mentioned above should be limited to yes, no, and I'm not sure. No one can know the feelings of every person and pastor in the ECC. People may feel "unsafe" simply because the church holds traditional views on marriage and gender but are treated with love and respect. Others may feel "unsafe" due to abuse from church leaders and members. The first scenario would meet my definition of safe: speaking and holding to biblical truth while loving the whole person as they come to us.
- I think "safe" is determined by the people and pastors in question, and I can't speak for them.
- I'm not sure that even matters. What does it mean to you?
- If by "safe" we mean that no one will consciously do them harm, then yes, I think that the ECC is a "safe" place. If by "safe" we mean that no one will ever disagree with them or hold them accountable for ripple effects of actions or beliefs that run contrary to what the ECC has communally discerned over the years, then perhaps not. But I refuse to believe that disagreement (even over things that matter to us deeply) essentially causes us as humans to be "unsafe" with one another.
- If safe means affirming, then I think the answer above is no. If safe means loving and kind while not affirming, then the answer is yes.
- It is against the bylaws of the ECC to be an LGBTQ Pastor/Elder. *[Editorial Note: This is not true. The ECC constitution and bylaws enumerate pastoral qualifications in Articles III-V. Neither there, nor in fact anywhere in the bylaws, are the words "LGBTQ", "gay", "lesbian", "transgender", "homosexual", "same-sex marriage/wedding", "sex", or "sexuality" ever mentioned.]*
- It means that everyone is welcome to come and receive the grace of God and respond to the truth of His word. We are not a safe place for LGBT-affirming pastors, nor should be we, since they have by definition rejected clear Biblical teaching.
- It means we can love people without accepting or embracing sinful behavior. We can show kindness without celebrating sin. We can love on and still teach that our sinful desires, no matter what they are, are sin and hurt God and his redemptive plan for humanity.
- It means we radically love everyone who walks in our doors, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, political leanings, or in this case sexual orientation and identity, AND we don't compromise on Jesus' high call toward sacrificial discipleship in all areas of our life including our sexuality. We ask, "what does it mean to submit our sexuality (whether straight or gay) to Jesus as Lord?"
- It's a poor choice of words in both questions... Especially the 2nd question.
- It's different in different contexts. Is the ECC a safe place for "LGBTQ+" people? Yes, in that all should be treated with dignity and respect as made in God image. But it should not be "safe" as in affirming sin and sinful lifestyles. So, affirming pastors should not be safe from the discipline or consequences of affirming sin. All people in all circumstances should be physically safe at all times.
- LGBTQ-affirming pastors and laypeople should be removed until they repent.
- Not in danger.
- Offering same-sex marriage.
- Physical and psychological safety in that people that are LGBTQ+ are loved and as Christ loves. It also means we dialogue with them in examining scripture and trying to find biblical truth together. "Safe" does not mean that we agree with them, that we don't speak to them through the Holy Spirit about what we see as biblical truth, and it does not mean that the congregation should not discipline those that are in leadership positions that we see as promoting sinful actions. It is not sinful to have same sex attraction. Just as it is not sinful to be tempted to view pornography. It is sinful to proceed with either of those desires.
- Safe in that they will not be ostracized or harassed but welcomed.
- Safe means it's a space where conversation can take place. I fear that in our current environment safe only means "if you agree with me."

- Safe means the ability to claim whatever label one chooses and affirm any and all practices of broader LGBTQ+ community.
- Safe means they are loved and valued while not having the church affirm their beliefs on this issue.
- That the pastors will not conduct same-sex marriages but will counsel and show the love of Jesus to individuals struggling with these issues. Congregations will love all people and show love as Jesus yet hate the sin.
- That's the catch, isn't it? Is God safe? Why are we told to fear Him? I believe fire is safe if you understand it's power and live accordingly.
- The people who oppose these behaviors usually just leave so the people left behind will all have the same views. Or the ones that do stay will be cancelled for speaking out.
- The question isn't even safe. The fact you are asking is showing that this isn't a credible question. Your results, whatever they will be, will give no actionable data.
- To do no harm. Difference of conviction is not harm.
- Welcome, invited.
- Welcomed with love and Biblical truth.
- Welcoming.
- You seem to be conflating LGBTQ+ people with sexually active LGBTQ+ people, which is a loaded way to create a survey and/or set up a debate. It assumes that someone's identity is based on their sex life or that sex is essential for a fulfilling life, which is a false equivalence and is unfortunate to what I thought was going to be a more objective, less-agenda'd survey. I understand the empathy to allow LGBTQ people to have sex and to be in a marriage, but the above conflation is still not helpful and is manipulative. You can be fully LGBTQ and not be having sex with your same sex or at all. I know many LGBTQ people like this, as well as straight single people, and I'd never shame them that they must be having sex or must be married in order to be whole or complete, or that their identity should be in sex or a spouse. With the question about LGBTQ-affirming pastors, you know what you are signing on for when you sign on with the ECC. Why sign on if you are LGBTQ-affirming? Sign on with an open and affirming denomination, if that is your conviction. There are lots of them out there, and honestly, I'm thankful for the ones who are preaching the gospel and preaching from Scripture, as this is a newer development overall. There will be LGBTQ people who want to be in sexual relationships /marriages with the same sex, despite what we believe and teach about Scripture and God's design, and it's okay to refer them to these churches and still maintain positive relationships with them.
- Your wording is intentionally misleading, in this context safe has no connection with violence or hate only the ability to remain in a pastoral role with same-sex affirmation.
- Affirm the sin.

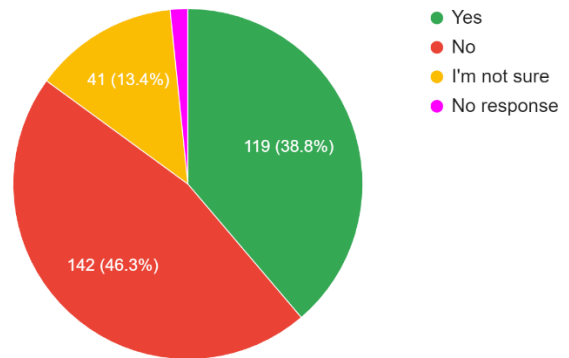
### Unclear

- "Safe", as long as privacy is protected.
- 1) Affirmed; 2) Freedom to act upon their conscience with full affirmation.
- A place to voice your differing opinion without losing congregants, your ordination, or your status among the ministerium. I have lost congregants, friends, and positions simply by questioning the Covenant Position, not even fighting against it.
- A place where discussion can happen regardless of position, and understanding can happen without uniformity.
- A place where one does not need to hide their beliefs.
- Able to fully express one's ideas and identity freely.
- Accepting (x2)
- Affirming without cause for being removed from my church or position.
- Can they belong and be part of the community?
- Emotionally safe, your job is not in jeopardy, embraced, safe to be the person you are without judgement.
- Free of judgement, criticism and exclusion from participating in church activities.
- Free to continue in fellowship, using their gifts for the good of the body of Christ and those who do not yet belong to it.
- Freedom to have a different opinion without relational fallout.
- I can't answer the above questions precisely because of the ambiguity of the word "safe" in the context. Also, as a non-affirming pastor and a cis-male heterosexual, I cannot speak to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people within the ECC apart from the few relationships I have with such persons.
- I don't think people would feel comfortable being "out" and if that's something about themselves they need to hide at church, church is not safe.
- It's unclear as to the degree of safety offered to pastors and to congregants.
- No fear of judgement or job loss.
- People who identify as LGBTQ+ feel and acknowledge full inclusion. Pastors and leaders who are allies can be so and act accordingly in ECC or ECC-adjacent ministry settings.

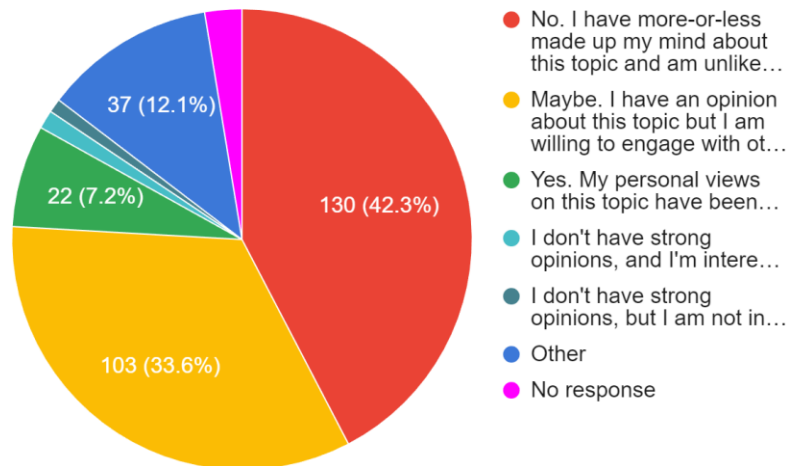
- Presence is neither celebrated nor condemned; their full acceptance as people.
- Providing a non-judgmental place to be yourself and worship God, and feel the love of Jesus as demonstrated by the love and acceptance from others.
- Respected. Treated as an equal member.
- Safe means being able to express your sexuality, gender identity and/or views on those issues without fear of rejection as a parishioner, church worker or ordained minister.
- Safe would mean no risk of being verbally attacked or treated as a second-class Christian.
- Safe would mean that we return to the Covenant ethos that existed for over a hundred years, which allowed Covenant churches and pastors to hold differing opinions on non-essential matters without fear of punishment or dismissal. The ways in which the ECC are "handling" this issue is unquestionably UN-Covenant.
- Space for an affirming viewpoint that allows them to hold the view openly and not fear losing their job or credentials.
- Speaking for Canada, I think most of our churches believe they are welcoming and people don't have to be ashamed. They wouldn't turn someone away on a Sunday morning. The degree to which our congregations are willing to accept and discuss and be open, varies. And even within each congregation there is differing opinion. But most of our churches are not affirming. So safe in that you won't be run out of the building. But safe as in you can be who you are, and we won't try to change you, and you'll never feel out of place?... Probably not.
- Supportive and life-giving.
- Thanks for the space to clarify -- physically safe = YES, or at least I hope so. Safe from being exposed to an opposing opinion about their lifestyle = NO. Hopefully emotionally safe even if there is no agreement. Pastors do risk their status if they perform same-sex unions, this is well understood, so to some degree their livelihood is not safe if they perform these unions.
- That is the question! I believe everyone is safe in Covenant congregations. That means they will be loved and embraced. It also means that they will be called to repent and allow the Spirit of God to transform them. The Church should be like Jesus, full of grace and truth.
- This is why I answered, "I'm not sure." Would I feel supported and stood-up-for in even being allowed to pray, let alone officiate in a same sex ceremony? I don't think I would feel safe. I think I would be risking my career and ordination. Yet would I feel supported and respected by many of my ECC colleagues if I did choose to officiate? I do believe so. I am thankful for the agree to disagree theology that many of my long term ECC colleagues still hold for each other. This is our history of how we were raised into this denomination.
- To be fully accepted and not judged.
- Without retribution.
- You're able to express your feelings and ideas toward the topic and be okay and not pushed out or ostracized.

Question #14: Do you believe that it is possible for the church to sincerely extend love and welcome to the LGBTQ+ community without a posture of full affirmation?

- Yes – 38.8%
- No – 46.3%
- I'm not sure – 13.4%
- No response – 1.6%



Question #15: Regardless of your current opinion on LGBTQ+ affirmation and inclusion in the church, are you interested in learning more and are you open to changing your mind?





- No. I have more-or-less made up my mind about this topic and am unlikely to change my mind. – 42.3%
- Maybe. I have an opinion about this topic, but I am willing to engage with others with an open mind and acknowledge the possibility that my mind could be changed about some things. – 33.6%
- Yes. My personal views on this topic have been shaken, and I'm interested in learning more with the possibility of changing my mind. – 7.2%
- I don't have strong opinions, and I'm interested in learning more. – 1.3%
- I don't have strong opinions, but I am not interested in learning more, at this time. – 1.0%
- Other – 12.1%
- No response – 2.6%

Other Responses:

#### Affirming

- After being a youth pastor, attending college and seminary at NPU, and working at Covenant offices, I left the church over this. And am done with the Covenant like so many other gay people who have left.
- As an ECC pastor who is open and affirming, I am a lifelong learner and am always open to learn more. I am trying to hold a church together that has a wide range of diverse opinions on LGBTQ+ inclusion.
- Change my mind on... What?
- I already have changed my mind. I grew up non-affirming. My faith, study of scripture and beloved ones made me find my stance now. I celebrate LGBTQ+ people and will work for their freedom everywhere and at all times.

- I am  inclusive and affirming Mama Bear  I will not ever not LOVE my queer community.
- I am a narthex episcopalian -- my gay daughter is a priest in the episcopalian church and we go back and forth -- I am quite inclusive and affirming with a spirit of celebration for same-sex unions.
- I am becoming increasingly affirming and inclusive. I do not have a settled conviction on every relevant issue, but I am highly unlikely to become less affirming and inclusive.
- I am convinced that queer affirmation is faithful to the gospel, but I remain open to deepening my understanding through scripture, theology, lived experience, and dialogue. My openness is not about reconsidering the dignity of queer people, which is settled, but about continually learning how best to embody justice, love, and belonging in the church.
- I have appreciated that the ECC has been inclusive on many issues - it is time for the move to share the love of Jesus for any and all who want it. The youth especially find the church to be old and rigid and does not show love but judgement. If we want to be a church that shows the Jesus was we need to act on it - throw the doors open wide.
- I have made up my mind that affirmation and inclusion is necessary for a healthy and whole church that reflects Christ more accurately. I am also willing to keep learning more about this topic.
- I have strong opinions AND I want to keep learning!
- I would have checked maybe knowing that I am wholeheartedly in favor of an open and affirming church/denomination, and recognize that I may not have all the answers to this issue. One can always learn more and change attitudes and perspectives.
- I've left for a fully inclusive denomination where I am learning more (ELCA).
- I've tried for years trying to come alongside people to "change" their minds. People are stubborn as an ass. You can't change someone's mind unless they want to learn and love with an open heart and mind. It would help if they KNEW someone who was LGBTQIA to learn from and love. They are my favorite people.
- My mind is made up about this topic, but I'm willing to learn how we can grow together.
- No, since I am no longer a member. I'm curious how this debate will end, and I'm very concerned as faculty of NPU. However, I found it necessary to leave the ECC for a more welcoming congregation.
- Somewhere between option one and two.

### Non-affirming

- I am always open and interested in more information. By the nature of it that would include the possibility of changing my mind. However, I don't believe any new information or new revelation will contradict old revelation. And I do believe that scripture is clear. And scripture is a revelation of God.
- I am always open to learning and changing my mind if it is in light of a better reading of Scripture. It's the affirmations of the "Centrality of the Word", and the "Dependence on the Holy Spirit", and the rest that must inform and frame our affirmation of "Freedom in Christ".
- I believe the Bible is clear God's position on sexual identity and marriage between one man and one woman. I have heard arguments of inclusion, and, in my opinion, they do not hold up to the scrutiny of Scripture.
- I don't like the language of these options. While I feel strongly about what I believe, I am open to an engaging conversation that leaves space to express differences of opinions. I sift through man-made traditions and the basic principles of this world that have guided my thoughts to this point, but at the same time scripture seems clear on this to me. I would have to have a Damascus Road experience to shift off of my current stance.
- I have done copious amounts of research. I wish there was sound doctrine to support LGBTQ concepts. I have found none.
- I think it is important to discuss these important realities, and I am always up for a study and conversation.
- I'm always interested in communication and discussion, but I doubt that I'll change my mind any more than you think that you'll probably change yours on this topic. That's not being stubborn--it's being honest with ourselves that we've come to conclusions for good reasons.
- I'm always open to changing my mind, but every time I've dug into this more deeply in scripture, I've found myself MORE convinced of the historic biblical position, not less convinced. And I have desperately wanted to change my mind.
- I'm good with a Biblical understanding of human sexuality.
- My conviction is very deep and I can't see myself changing my mind, but I'm always open to dialogue and learning from other perspectives.
- No. (x2)
- The Bible is crystal clear and will never change!
- The first answer makes it sound like I am stubborn and unwilling to listen to anyone or anything different than what I believe but I have thought this through, prayed about it, and had conversations with others about this topic and do not believe I would change my stance.

### Unclear

- I'm willing to live and let live.
- I always want to be open. And I think I can tell when I won't be persuaded of something, if that makes sense. I want full inclusion but I can't square all of it with scripture, and the arguments from affirming scholars are not persuasive. The ECC is at its core a scripture-centered denomination, it will be very hard for it to change course.
- I'm not really interested in learning more.
- I'm willing to continue learning and to walk alongside affirming pastors. I'm even happy to serve alongside them, as long as our disagreements do not amount to a denial of biblical authority. However, having spent considerable time considering this topic and having come to the ECC from an affirming denomination that was split because of disagreements over biblical authority as it applies to sexuality, I'm pretty settled in my conviction and believe it to be biblically consistent.
- This issue has not been adequately or fully understood across the ECC, so reactions have been emotional or willful without addressing the unanswered questions that have arisen.
- Yes. I believe we should always have a posture of the humble learner. We should always listen more than we speak. But I would not say my views have been shaken. I would say they continue to grow and hopefully move more toward loving my neighbor.

## Section 4: Open-Ended Survey Reflection

**Question:** What is your response to the survey? Did taking the survey bring up any noteworthy thoughts, feelings, or memories? Is there anything else that you would like to share that wasn't captured by the survey questions? Please let me know your thoughts.

*Responses:*

### LGBTQ+ Voices


- I almost didn't answer. I haven't attended much at all, but my son-in-law's family is at the leadership, and his brother is pastor there and I have a trans adult child. So, this is still up for me. Thanks for making it and including.
- I am sad for the ECC and the way that it has rejected its queer members and allowed for the poor treatment of North Park students and alums, and the punishment of ECC pastors who affirm queer people. So many wasted years when the ECC could've been doing the work of Christ.
- I grew up in an ECC church in Canada. I was sent and supported as a missionary (through a non-ECC organization). When I came out as queer and affirming, we were cut off. We were mistreated, lied to, etc. As were members of my extended family.
- I think the ECC is hopeless on this issue and therefore hopeless as a Christian denomination. It is not the Covenant church in which I was raised.
- I'll send you a separate message, but I left the ECC almost a decade ago, so I don't know the latest developments. These responses come from a long history in the ECC, but I was already gone by the Omaha meeting. I left after Adam Phillips' church in Portland was expelled [Christ Church: Portland was a church plant for whom the ECC rescinded support], and after NPU Chaplain Judy Peterson was canned for officiating a same-sex marriage. By that time, I thought things had become irretrievable.
- I'm reminded how hopeless I feel in regards to the ECC.
- It did make me remember being 16 and realizing I'd never get married at my home church. This is particularly pressing since I am getting (gay) married this year and it will not be at my home church or by my home pastor, even though he would be the logical choice if I wasn't gay.
- It is an important survey to give, as this is a contentious topic without an easy solution. I do think some of the questions could've stood to be proofread by a queer person, the term "transgendered" for example is simply not in use in any way. As an example, I did not become transgendered, I am transgender.
- The survey brought up mixed feelings but mostly made me glad I chose to leave for my own mental and emotional and spiritual health.
- Thank you for creating it! I'd be curious to know what led you to make this- your personal interactions with Embrace, and the ECC's engagement both theologically and practically with our queer siblings in Christ. Basically, I'd like to know more of why you are going to all this effort. This helps me trust more that this is an ok place for some of the telling of my own story.
- The more I learn about God's love and hear from queer people, the more affirming I become.
- This survey reminds me how heartbroken I am by the Covenant's stance on this issue. My whole reason for joining the Covenant was because of its lack of doctrine & its commitment to freedom of personal faith. So, so disappointing to see the narrowing of the Covenant's embrace of agreeing to disagree. A terrible loss.
- When I started at NPTS, the ECC was on the verge of being moderately open, then the fundamentalist evangelicals arrived and as always the church cared more about property value than people.
- Some of the questions/answer prompts made it very clear to me that this project is biased towards an affirming perspective. That is not invalidating of the project; I think it can still gather good data and drive meaningful conversations. Some of the responses that reflected a more traditional biblical sexual ethic were phrased in ways that roughly translated to me as "No, I'm stubborn, and I'm not changing my mind on this." I think the survey could have had more participation of folks from a Side B/traditional biblical sexual ethic crowd in the design/writing phase. Nevertheless, I'm glad someone is doing this work, even if it feels biased from the start.
- Engaging with these questions churns up so much grief and disgust with the denomination that I grew up in and still consider to be my extended family. I left my ECC church over LGBTQ+ issues but still pray that somehow, someday my family can safely return to it. Given that my child recently came out as trans, I fear that day of reconciliation is farther away than ever for us.

## Affirming

- I no longer identify as a Christian, in large part due to the views and exclusionary actions of the Covenant Church, a community I gave my life to (Cov church member, NPU grad, Covenant missionary, Cov Denominational leadership) until 2019.
- 1 of my 3 kids identifies as cisgender. They have all walked away from the Covenant. I hope they all find their way back to Faith, but our denomination's position on LGBTQ+ sure doesn't help.
- A jaded feeling, somewhat. It's not that I don't hope things get better, but I'm very skeptical. The ECC is entrenched in fear, greed, and a reactive spirit that has no room for freedom in Christ.
- Appreciate all your efforts.
- As I have just started at a UCC church with the intention of transferring my ordination, I found this a helpful reflection point, although it brought up some sadness about the ECC's treatment of this issue and why I feel compelled to change denominations.
- Curious how people respond to/interpret the "clobber texts" in light of the ministry of Jesus and alongside other OT laws that we do not follow today.
- Even if the ECC allowed for freedom of thought on this topic I don't think I would be able to find an ECC church that would be welcoming enough for me to attend.
- Excellent survey.
- For me, this is an issue of sadness. I love my church family and I'm committed to [my home church]. However, I am haunted by the inauthenticity/inconsistency of how I live my life and my beliefs about LGBTQ+ and the stance of the ECC. I hope I don't have to choose. It's a no-win situation.
- Hmmmm, yes, I have many, many feelings about this topic. I know you've tried to reach out before directly- I've been unsure how to engage your questions and when I have the energy for it, to be honest. But let's try a conversation sometime soon. I do think this is an identity defining reality for the ECC. I honestly wonder if it's already been established and embedded, and the cost felt. But I always want to lean toward hope - and perhaps seeds planted now help make room for something later on.
- Hopefully more discussion will help.
- I am curious about what you envision as realistic outcome of this work. Do you actually believe that the ECC could change their position and become a fully affirming denomination at some point in the near future (next 20 years or so)? With churches and pastors being kicked out, and churches, pastors, and members leaving as a result, those who hold an affirming position will continue to become a smaller minority, especially while the Covenant continues to grow with new churches and members joining in part because of alignment with the ECC's current position on human sexuality.
- I am currently attending a Methodist church, and our pastor is gay and is married. I understand many people can't wrap their heads around that.
- I am grateful that this survey is being done. Hopefully it will shed light on this situation.
- I am open to conversations! However, I will always side on the error of love. I don't intend to spend time in conversation with those who do harm or allow for harm to be done (i.e. who can't be moved or open to the Spirit).
- I am thankful that someone is asking these questions. Thank you.
- I believe including gender identity in the same category as sexual orientation conflates two very different issues. I am fully affirming of same-sex relationships, but consider transgenderism a very different phenomenon and am skeptical about the totalizing identity-based declarations of many activists. See Andrew Sullivan's recent op-ed about how the trans rights movement has co-opted and perhaps even tarnished the important work of the gay rights movement.
- I don't think the common member understands the deep trauma associated with being cast out of a faith community.
- I enjoyed the survey. It brought some closure to me, having graduated and entered my first call in 2019. It also reminded me of how hurt I was by the decision made at the annual meeting that year, because the Pietist side of the ECC has always meant more to me than the Movement Evangelical side. The most powerful memory I had while taking it was of my last Midwinter in Denver, where the Posture Shift program was presented. The speaker talked about praying at the weddings of loved ones and a representative of the ECC cut him off and clarified that it was not allowed under the current guidelines. That was when I knew I would not be able to be ordained in the ECC, although it wasn't confirmed until the Annual Meeting that year. It still makes me quite sad and angry. We used to be comfortable living in the tension, but we've let the American culture war kill the denomination; it just doesn't know it's dead yet.
- I feel hopeless about the situation we are in.
- I feel that I should note [my local church] pastoral staff did the very best they could in accepting my gay daughter and my transgender daughter when they came out, given the current stance of the ECC. I would be willing to share more about our experience with this.
- I feel very free of this conversation. But I pray ECC leaders will listen to the Holy Spirit.

- I have a trans child who grew up in our ECC church, they were on the worship team for a few years but was challenged when some congregants were vocal in their disapproval. I went to our pastor who assured me that when it came down to grace vs truth that he would always err on the side of grace. Our family chose to stay because our pastor's loving kindness. Those congregants left our church. Our pastor also taught this past Sunday that "religion without mercy misses the heart of God". We continue to serve & be part of the work being done at this church.
- I have worked my way through this issue years ago -- it is sad to realize the ECC is still making this a 'thing.' It's so NOT a thing anymore. At [my local church] we do have a trans-man in our small group. [Our church] is already an "open" space, but our dear friend knows it is not a 'safe' space for him and his partner. But are they welcome? Of course -- just not celebrated and not a safe space for them to bring their friends.
- I hope the Covenant realizes how many young people have left the Covenant because of this issue.
- I hope this is the first step towards change within the ECC and that we can start accepting and embracing the LGBTQ+ community.
- I offered a few responses that were in between the options listed.
- I requested my removal from the ECC ordination rolls after they began purging faithful pastors over LGBTQ issues. The failure of the church on the issue led to me leaving church all together and mostly the entire construct of Christian faith.
- I think, in addition to harm caused to LGBTQ+ members (and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole), the removal of churches was detrimental to all congregations in the loss of membership. It created unnecessary division, grief, financial issues, and a lack of diversity (and God LOVES diversity in His church!). After the 2019 annual meeting, several LGBTQ+ members and allies left our church, and it was incredibly painful to lose these friends and the gifts that we received from them. Additionally, trust has been broken between the church and the denomination. There are a lot of feelings of bitterness toward all things ECC, which is too bad because the ECC is doing a lot of good things, too. I think the denomination needs to acknowledge this and has work to do in repairing its relationship with member churches. A lament of the decision and its aftermath would be welcomed at my church, I know.  
It also makes me sad that I don't feel like my church is a place I can invite people to. I have a Christian trans friend who recently moved to my city. I did not feel comfortable inviting them to my church because of the ECC's position and recommended more affirming churches. Fortunately, they have found a church where they are loved and accepted, but this dissonance between my personal convictions and the church's positions have been an internal struggle. I want to stay committed to my church and the people here, but it is increasingly harder the longer the ECC holds onto this stance.
- I think that one of the important distinctives for me is the 1996 binding of the resolution on human sexuality because, as far as I am aware, it is the ONLY resolution to be bound. Resolutions were written specifically as short position papers and are not ever to be bound. [Editorial Note: The 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality was "bound", which is to say, identified as the basis for ECC policy, at the 2004 Annual Meeting.]
- I used to be proud to reference the inclusion of the Covenant. The rigid, and dare I say, punitive way that ECC has dealt with issue in the past 20 or so years has been and is problematic and actually not Christlike. I understand that there needs to be learning and understanding and it takes time, but I think ECC has dug in their heels and is on the wrong side of things. I had written my letter of resignation from the ECC just before Covid hit. It is written just not sent. My dad joined the church when a neighbor boy scout's mom brought him to church, his family started to attend, then my mom joined because she saw a belief bigger than herself then we three children were brought in, then my 2 children. That is 3 generations who experienced the first open door of inclusion. Sad to say I am the last one here, and rather precariously. The Covenant has been my home - but home has become quite unwelcoming. I have some hope.
- I'd be curious to know how many of the respondents have, like my family, left the ECC over this issue. We currently are members of an Open and Affirming UCC congregation, and as a church we are able to address other needs in our community because we aren't spending our energy fighting this battle.
- I'm encouraged by this survey and hope the conversation continues. I've been distressed by churches being pushed out of the ECC based on this issue and it surprised me when I first heard of it because I think of the ECC as an open place for theological disagreement.
- I'm glad you're doing this!
- I'm grateful for this space to process my feelings around the ECC's discerned position. However, it has brought up deep emotions of sadness concerning my many queer students and their safety in this denomination that I love so deeply.
- I'm thankful for this work but feel skeptical about its outcome. But the fight should continue.
- [Editorial Note: This response was given by a member of FCC Minneapolis, who attended during the church's disciplinary action and subsequent removal from the ECC. For reasons of privacy, I will not be sharing the entire statement.] At the annual meeting, my pastor was stripped of his ministry credentials, and our beloved church community--people who had loved and supported us during this incredibly difficult season--was excommunicated from the denomination it helped start. The entire experience was one of the most intense experiences of my life. It was painful to watch my faith community be used as a pawn in a power struggle rooted in upholding the patriarchy--not in furthering Christ's mission. It was spiritually exhausting to repeatedly invest precious energy in fruitless conversations where my church members,

my pastor and leadership appealed to the Covenant distinctives and begged for grace--only to be treated like petulant and disobedient children. It was devastating to watch people I didn't know weigh the value of my pastor, our church, and our leadership, and for us to be deemed expendable.

- In graduate school working on a minor in genetics in the 80s and 90s these subjects were openly discussed.
- In the early 1980s, I met a gay guy in one of my art classes. I saw that he was human. Later, when I lived near Santa Cruz, I met many same-sex attracted people and again recognized their common humanity. In my work as a spiritual director, I encountered several more and a trans person. By that time, I was also working under a bivocational ministry license. (When I could no longer sign the paper honestly, I gave up that license.) My LGBTQ clients understood that I was doing what I could within the denomination to change their hard stance and they all encouraged me to persist. I continued until it became clear that the denomination was hardening its stance and resisting entertaining welcoming our LGBTQ+ neighbors as equally loved by God. At that point I left the Covenant, and after some searching, I became an Episcopalian.
- It codified the process I've gone through over the past 20+ years to become affirming. I "accidentally" drifted away from ECC around the time LGBTQIA inclusion became a flashpoint, for completely unrelated reasons but I do not recognize the denomination in which I was baptized, confirmed, married, and served on committees. But sadly, based on my time as a congregant and lay leader at an ECC church, as well as being a student and employee at North Park University, I am disappointed but not surprised this is the direction the denomination went.
- It continues to disturb me that the church focuses on what it considers to be sexual sin, to the exclusion of other sins. Of the seven deadly sins, six are overlooked.
- It frustrated me to be reminded that our church is still in such chaos over this. I remember being so saddened when our longtime pastor, Steve Armfield, was basically defrocked for officiating his son's marriage to another man. I remembered the time I turned down being an elder because I am affirming of the LGBTQ+ community and felt that being a leader in The ECC church would look like I was approving of their non-affirming stance and would let down the LGBTQ+ friends and family that I have. However, I am grateful that The ECC is even having this conversation around non-cis identifies.
- It honestly brings up a little trauma from my time in the ECC (I was denied ordination around this and pushed out of my church as I was committed to full inclusion and celebration of LGBTQ+ people and did not appreciate the denomination's handling of abuse towards women either. It felt like the ECC was happy to take the money of women and LGBTQ+ pastors for seminary and training but was unwilling to hire us or keep us on when our perspectives went against the "old boys club.") and I am further committed to liberation for LGBTQ+ people in my spaces and places now. I am again grateful I left the ECC and found home and safety elsewhere. Due to all of this I developed health issues. I have found freedom and hope and health in leaving the ECC.
- It stirred up the pain I felt when I realized the church I grew up in wasn't accepting of my child. People I loved in the ECC turned their backs on us. What hurt even more was seeing the glee some expressed when First Covenant was forced out. How could anyone be joyful about a church being pushed out?
- Lots of religious trauma in my years with the covenant. Not just LGBTQIA but over the years. I left 25 years ago and tried to come back 6 years ago and I couldn't stay. I married into the covenant 50 years ago. I am not evangelical. But because my husband and his family (including my brother-in-law is a pastor) they are  ECC so like I said it is a part of my life but our kids and I do not attend.
- My child is LGBTQ. I was in somewhat of a leadership position in my church. I feared that I would be removed from my position because of my love, acceptance, and support of my child. The trajectory of the ECC in this area is a key reason I have left the denomination.
- No, thoroughly done.
- No. I've unfortunately become completely numb to this conversation.
- Not at this time.
- Not really. Omaha in 2019 was a nightmare - we were there. Shady and back-door deals were made, and things were done out of order to achieve their desired results. The Reformation Project conference in Fall 2019 restored and healed me. I won't go back to the Covenant. And I won't ever say I belong to a denomination again. I used to describe myself as "I'm Covenant", but I refuse to say "I'm Presbyterian" now. I'm a member of a Presbyterian church, but I won't ever again align with a denomination. I follow Jesus. That's all.
- Not trying to be snarky, but it made me REALLY thankful to be out of the struggle. I commend those who stay to push, but I hope more people realize they can find peace by leaving. (I say this as a member of 40+ years; leaving was not easy.)
- Our church has suffered losses in the last years. We are rebuilding. I feel that the ECC stance on queer folks will be a very big stumbling stone for the people we are trying to reach with God's love in our community.
- Reading this brought back all sorts of drama and trauma in my past: marrying into the covenant 50 years ago (it's in my husband's family blood line), all the evangelical stuff (I'm not evangelical anymore), dealing with rude pastors when our son came out, and then the Preston sprinkle shit .... Yes drama and trauma.... I can finally say I am done with church. I will remember the good but lots of unpleasant stuff too. Jonny, I am so proud of you for keeping on the good fight to include our dear friends and family who are queer. I tried for so long. So many tears. So many friends I've lost!

Those who want to be a part of the church should be ~~100~~ included and loved. Keep up the good work Jonny. It's hard to get people to change. I'd rather be in a room full of queer people watching a drag queen show than in a church. It's way more loving and fun!!! By the way, Jesus will be sitting with us having a beer too!

- Reminded me how happy I am to now be in an affirming denomination. This question of inclusion seems so overdue.
- Thanks for doing this.
- The survey did not provide enough answers for someone who is no longer attending a Covenant church.
- The work that went into this was clear in how you crafted the response options. I cannot wait to see the summary!
- This lifelong Covenanter and mother of a gay son can no longer affiliate with a denomination that is not inclusive and accepting.
- This reminded me how disappointing the ECC has been, and also how far the ECC is from where I think they should be. I also think it is so disappointing that this conversation is still needed. It's so disheartening.
- This survey on one hand encourages me that there are people open to and working towards inclusion while on the other hand deeply pains me that the denomination I was raised in, participated in, and had my children baptized in is rigid and judgmental. My family and I left the ECC due to its views and unbiblical, unchristian statements about the LGBTQIA+ community.
- This survey was a reminder of the deep pain of my church being kicked out of the ECC and having my ordination revoked due to our being open and affirming. It has meant the loss of my faith and moving completely on from ministry. I hope the ECC will eventually find itself on the right side of history and repent for the pain they've caused. But I've moved on, have forgiven the ECC, and rarely think of the denomination that supposedly "formed" me.
- Very pleased that this survey is taking place!
- Very thorough and intentional! It's so encouraging to know there are still efforts to push back on the current stance of the ECC and provide additional information to consider. Only thing I would add is a question in between my HOPE for the ECC and what I EXPECT for the ECC, and that is what I think the ECC should do next. While I hope the ECC is one day fully affirming, I think the best course of action, in the near future is to drop their position and allow individual churches to decide for themselves, similar to other "issues" that are debated and not clear in the Bible. I grew up in the ECC believing we were a denomination centered around community, rather than belief. But that is no longer the case. We need to re-root ourselves in asking "where is it written?", agreeing to still come to the table even if we disagree, and only holding each other accountable the core truths of the Gospel. Trying to argue for full affirmation from the ECC right now will only cause more harm; we need to meet halfway and try to continue the conversation around letting it go for now.
- We left the Covenant Church after 50 years because it was no longer a Pietist denomination. It was willing to discriminate against people based solely on prejudice and fear. A non-credal church chose one point of belief to remove pastors and congregations as well as deny the benefits of sacraments to individuals. We are completely at home as Swedish-American pietists in the Episcopal Church.
- We need to be willing to listen to others who are on different journeys...that's how we learn as we all are in this world!
- Well done.
- Yes, it definitely brought up all the feelings. Your questions were very well written. Thank you for allowing me to participate.

### Non-affirming

- After reading through this, I have to say it was a complete waste of time. The Evangelical Covenant Church doesn't need more surveys, projects, or attempts to "reimagine" biblical truth. What we need is the courage to stand firmly on the authority of God's Word. The Bible is clear, and our calling as a denomination is clear: to faithfully preach, teach, and live in obedience to it.  
The ECC must move forward with the removal of all churches, professors, and pastors who reject and distort biblical truth. Tolerating heresy under the guise of diversity or curiosity only weakens the witness of the church and confuses the next generation. This is not about opinion or preference—it is about truth.  
For the health of our churches and the future of our mission, we must close the door on this debate and move on in faithfulness to Christ.
- Every time I receive an email like this, I understand why so many Covenant churches are choosing to leave. This issue has been addressed, and the discerned voice of the Annual Meeting has not shifted. The Covenant is one of the few denominations that is not punitive if churches wish to leave. I do not understand why anybody would fight to stay in a body that they have obviously drifted from.
- Good survey.
- I am horrified and deeply grieved at the very idea of promoting any kind of sin, but far more so at and suggestion of changing the definition of the Gospel or even suggesting the possibility of anything other than faith in Christ alone as necessary for salvation and thus determinative of church membership.

- I am unhappy about you putting your personal ideas forward as the correct ones and putting churches in the ECC in a bad light. The Bible does NOT affirm same-sex marriages or genders other than, ... "God created male and female" period. You are taking cultural ideas and changing scriptures to fit cultural ideas. This is wrong and creates pain and strife within the body of believers. You are creating disunity within the church and should stop immediately. Though I'm sure you will try to throw my answers away as they do not support your own, I have always shown love and care to those I know in the LBGQT+ community and invited them to church. We can love the person and hate the sin, no matter the sin.
- I appreciate your survey and sincere effort to bring about change. While I disagree with your desired result, I respect your integrity. Thank you for offering "other" as a response.
- I believe that discussions need to be had regarding pastoring and embracing LGBTQ+ people in churches and communities, while holding to biblical conviction. This survey focused primarily on emotions and experiences but gave little attention to Scripture. Freedom in Christ is an essential distinction of the ECC, but our first affirmation is the centrality of the word of God.
- I believe that this survey is disturbing within a denomination (ECC) whose foundation is rooted in Biblical principles and not cultural influences. Maybe our people should be more careful in regard to theological discussion and focus more on biblical discussion. I firmly believe there is a difference.
- I believe there is no outcome to pursuing this pathway other than a version of what happened among the UMC, UCC, ELCA, etc. who split over this issue. If you consider those places a light and place where the world looks for the Gospel, then I guess continue the path. To my eyes, they have lost their light, by choice.
- I feel it's a continuation of the same problem. The ECC is a covenant of churches by which churches voluntarily choose to participate with full knowledge and awareness of the discerned stances, all of stances. To continue to argue against those positions is to not be in harmony. In the same way that we are voluntarily choosing to participate, we can live into our religious freedom in Christ by voluntarily choosing not to participate. Should we disagree with the discerned positions of the ECC.
- I shared most of them in the comments already. I'm surprised by the agenda of the survey, where I initially thought it was meant to just gather data and/or celebrate the LGBTQ people in the ECC who are living out a traditional biblical sexual ethic. They need to be in color and highlighted so our more conservative churches can see LGBTQ people exist and are picking up their cross and following Jesus in this amazing, role-model type of way. They need to be our keynote speakers and pastors, without the ignorant fears so many conservative people have. The slant of this survey and it seems, The ECC in Color, diminishes these experiences and the opportunity to highlight an alternative way of being fully LGBTQ and fully Covenant. "In Color" should not be the same as "In Bed" or "Having Sex," which seems to be how you're defining it. This diminishes the personhood of LGBTQ people and how they experience their queerness in all the non-sexual parts of life.
- I think it is ridiculous that the Covenant is trying to conform to society instead of following the teachings from the Bible.
- I think it is so sad that so many wish to trade in Gods best for worldly good. The Bible is the inherent word of God and to twist it into something just to feel good is so sad. We can love one another without accepting sin. We can care for all people without watering down the Word of God.
- I think it's good to be talking about these things and broadening our care for LGBTQ+ members of our congregations. I believe the ECC's position is right and that we should hold to it, but that doesn't negate that we owe much more care and discipleship to side-B queer folks. It's a lonely place to be, with side A people saying they should just pursue relationships and marriage, leaving them ostracized amongst much of the rest of the queer community who don't understand their decision to be faithful to their convictions, but also ostracizing from the other end of spectrum to have so many in our church communities thinking there is something inherently sinful about a queer orientation and leave queer folks abandoned on that side as well. Side B churches and pastors have a unique opportunity to care well for folks that are getting left behind and left out by both sides of this discussion.
- I think my only reaction to the survey is that it feels about 10 years too late. We've been through about 5 iterations of revisionist groups that have organized and failed. The questions asked here feel like questions being asked at the beginning or middle of a heated debate in our denomination, but my sense is that this conversation, at least the Side A vs. Side B conversation, is all but over in the ECC. As many old school covenanters were slowly becoming open and affirming, the denomination was growing quickly, but all of the new growth was from conservative ethnic churches and transfer growth from churches fleeing open and affirming denominations. That kind of institutional momentum is impossible to shift. And now, not only has the ECC quickly grown with mostly side B Christians, at the same time most agitators from the Side A group are leaving, the conversation is changing, and those who are left are earnestly desiring to talk about anything else. I think we do need to have robust conversations about LGBTQ+ inclusion, linking arms with organizations like ReVoice, and leaning into our historic biblical perspective. That is the future.
- I thought some answers you gave were bias. Terms like "I fear" represented the traditional perspective, while progressive responses did not accompany those emotive statements. I felt increasingly dismissive of this survey because of that bias. I used to have a more affirming view of LGBTQ+ issues, but the behaviors and lack of wisdom from that perspective have

led me increasingly away from an affirming position. Churches under the rainbow flag stumble to a close, in my experience.

- I went to Covenant Bible College in 1993/4. Even back then our professors recommended to not go to North Park because of its teaching (it wasn't called Woke or Social Justice back then) and even 2 or 3 decades before that the Covenant was beginning all the compromises and moving towards worldly views and away from Biblical views. It is sad but all foretold.
- I would say that it is not worded very neutrally. Despite efforts to be balanced, it biases heavily toward a progressive stance on full inclusion.
- In my role as an ordained pastor, I will work to voice and teach what the Bible and Church tradition have held for the history of the church. There are two genders by God's design and to pretend otherwise is to take God's roll. I believe that is what led to the fall of Lucifer. God and I love all people, all of whom have sinned. We are all called to turn from our sin to a closer walk with Jesus.
- None at this time.
- Our church would dismiss me as pastor if I was open and affirming. I think it is important to also realize and recognize this dynamic in our denomination. Some of what has happened in our denomination has caused people all sides of this issue to feel "unsafe," not just the LGBTQ+ community.
- The constant push to bring into alignment to what society wants the church to accept but is biblically against GOD'S will only hasten the departure of the biblical-based churches in the denomination. Either the church will split or slowly fracture.
- The reason we are leaving the Covenant is because they are leaning more and more in the direction of affirming all things LGBTQ. In my opinion, the writing is on the walls. We are getting out before they go down this road.
- The survey makes me concerned that there are even people who consider themselves "Christian" to be considering homosexuality as a biblical way of life.
- This survey is full of the opinions and pining of man, not scripture; that tells a lot about the topic at hand. We should get back to what scripture is very clear on with this issue.
- This survey is more likely to tear the ECC apart than our doctrine.
- Unfortunately, the survey is clearly not written in a way that is impartial or acknowledges the pastoral heart and longing and struggle by which I have shaped my heart for ministry and my heart for the LGBTQ community. While I clearly affirm the ECC position, I walk into every relationship and interaction with a heart to see someone's full self with compassion and listening. I always nuance my interactions with an invitation to disagree and listen. But the work of denying translation and animosity and villain status that is put on about affirming scripture is a disservice to everyone. Until the LGBTQ+ "Christian" community can agree what a godly sexual ethic is and what might be included in the term "sexual immorality" there is no real conversation that can take place about affirming, because it is drawn up as a two-choice option accept all of us and what we think and feel or accept none. I whole heartedly reject this definition because it ignores the need for all of us to be transformed by Christ. It is for this lack of nuance and sensitivity that I'm concerned about sharing my name and church.
- You might have asked if respondents are familiar with the writings of Alissa Childers, Rosaria Butterfield, or Christopher Yuan. Also, you seem to have a very shallow and unbiblical understanding of love. Love divorced from truth is just sentimentality.

### Unclear

- The Covenant church has always agreed to disagree. I don't see why this issue is any different. I realize every ECC church and members will not agree on stances but that's ok as long as there is acceptance in differing opinions from both sides.
- Feel a greater need for a theological conversation to examine scripture and the arguments for and against "moral equivalency."
- *[Editorial Note: This person works for the ECC and asked me to keep their identity private, so I am only including a portion of their response.]* I don't want it to be this way, but there has been negative response from the leadership of the denomination regarding this project, as I'm sure you are well aware. I think this is important work. I don't know the full history on why it's being done outside of the denominational participation, but I imagine you've come up against resistance. The denominational response is sad to me. One of the things said is "we don't know who this is or why they are doing it or what they plan to do with the information". I find that a hard statement to swallow. Regarding how I felt taking the survey - I have been wading through this topic for a few years now. I grew up with traditional conservative teaching on this. But my heart tells me that it's not black and white. There are so many aspects to evaluate. In the end, love comes first. I don't know what that means yet as far as statements and resolutions and doctrine and policy. But I know love comes first. What does love (JESUS) require of me?
- I am angry at how this seems to be an issue that the church has doubled down on, disregarding other positions and systems of the past and present that cause harm and have caused harm, which remain unreconciled without full restorative justice or healing, such as positions on assimilation of American Indians in areas where the ECC was

expanding, lack of support for inclusion based on race, limited affirmation of women (especially single women or as part of a childless couple), those who have been abused, etc. I worry that this will be another issue that may have partial resolution someday without a true exploration of harm, lament, confession, and healing.

- I am sad that this topic is a reason that I decided to step away from pastoral ministry in the ECC. As a former youth pastor, I am so honored that I have dozens of students who are confident to be in committed same-sex relationships and marriages, yet my heart breaks as they are not all feeling “approved” or accepted by their own church family. Will I return to ministry? I think so. Will it be with the ECC? I am not sure. If the ECC truly stood behind our Waldenstrom stance to agree to disagree and be congregational, then I would be much more loyal to my generational deep commitment to the ECC.
- I appreciate your efforts in lifting up LGBTQ+ affirming voices in our denomination and for framing it in Covenant values of unity.
- I felt the rage against the covenant again rising up in me. Every memory I have there is tainted by all I now know.
- I think there is more nuance than most people realize between an open and affirming stance and where most of the Covenant is at. I'm not sure your survey fully captures some of that nuance. Nevertheless, it was a good exercise for me, and I think we need more opportunities to both personally reflect and communally engage in this topic.
- I was tempted to type some open responses but went with the responses that best fit my feelings at the time, hopefully so you get better data.
- I don't know if changing the “form” of governance will make the church more attractive to the LGBTQ+ community. We can't even get cis-gendered people to come to church.
- It caused me to reflect and think deeply about my current position on these very important issues and how to engage them.
- It did bring up a lot of thoughts. My personal views of affirming the LGBTQ+ community have evolved drastically over the years (away from viewing certain lifestyles as sinful towards being fully accepting). I am still struggling with my views on how the church should adapt or change.
- It's really sad to know how many people have been alienated by the church as a whole and have left Christianity behind as a result. Until this point, I've always been proud of the Covenant's open arms and the stance on this topic is unrecognizable.

Supportive counseling can be really helpful as individuals try to sort out their thoughts, as certainly some people are confused about what they are feeling. We should be a place that can help without judgement.

- Thank you for continuing this conversation.
- THANK YOU for doing this -- I am interested in whatever results you choose to publish.
- Thank you for providing this opportunity to address these challenges. Where is the ECC leadership in this discussion? Silent!
- Thanks for making this happen. I'm excited to see what it opens for us.
- Thanks for your work.
- The biases of this survey and the surveyor are clear. I'm grateful for that. However, surveys like these cannot account for the range of positions between inclusion/exclusion and affirmation/non-affirmation. Though my theology is non-affirming and my biblical convictions have been settled through much conversation, study, prayer, and listening, my posture toward LGBTQ+ members of our church (yes, we have and have had LGBTQ+ members in our congregation, and they know we're non-affirming) is not stereotypical of a non-affirming pastor. I know many non-affirming pastors who reflect that same dynamic. This issue requires serious conversation and consideration, but it isn't as simple as love=affirmation and non-affirmation=harm.
- The issue in question, at least for me, seems to be the ECC's adoption of mainline evangelical churches insufficiently cognizant and representative of the Covenant's sixth affirmation which, as a result, is becoming largely worthless. It is changing the complexion of our collective from a broadly accepting and communally-discerned body to one that "tows the line" with the newer (and wealthier) congregations calling the ECC home.
- The last question about safety helped me re-evaluate some of my earlier answers. I'm still not sure about a lot, and I'm not sure if I'll ever be more sure, but it's a good question. Separately, I worry that if the church (local or as a denomination) focuses too much on morality, we lose sight of becoming more loving and just, as Christ.
- Theologically, I'm still trying to figure it out. Practically and realistically... yes I believe we need to be affirming and accepting as evident as the immense harm we Christians have caused to God's children and our call to love one another. I will share this survey with fellow church members who are LGBTQ+.
- This is a very challenging and difficult topic, but somehow still needs to be addressed. This survey is a good first step. Personally, when you really dig in, I don't think the Bible has as strong a stance against homosexuality to the extent that many Christians perceive it to have. Sure, there are passages here and there that talk about the behavior being vile, but even if we were to conclude that homosexuality is a sin, who are we to judge and discriminate against those who practice that behavior, when we are all equally sinful in other ways? Is homosexuality even brought up in the Ten

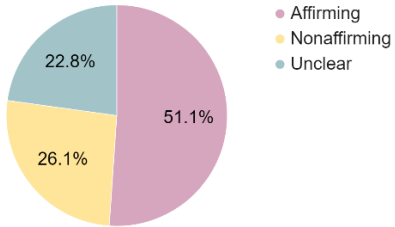
Commandments? Are we not all guilty of violating many of the Ten Commandments ourselves (idolatry, coveting, lying, dishonoring our parents, not loving our neighbor ... etc.)? How hypocritical it is of us as Christians to discriminate against gays.



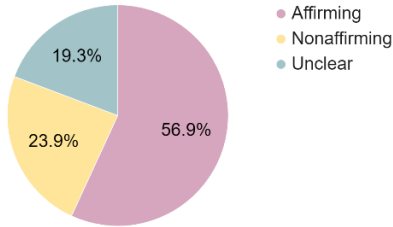
## Analysis

Response breakdown by generation:

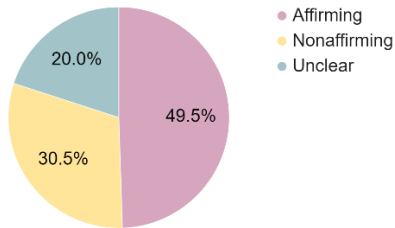
Baby Boomer (1946-1964)



Generation X (1965-1979)



Millennial (1980-1994)



Silent Generation:

- 75% affirming
- 25% unclear

Generation Z

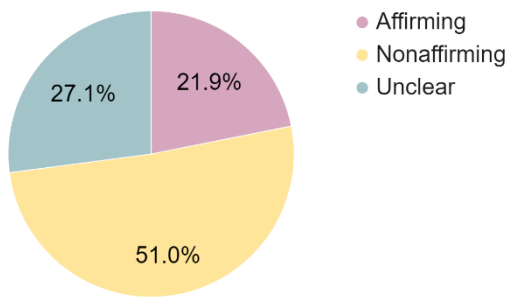
- 67% affirming
- 33% nonaffirming

Generation Alpha

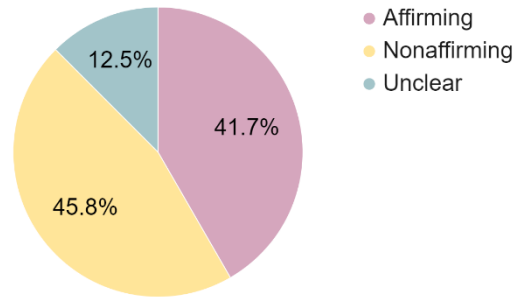
- 100% affirming  
(1 response)

Responses from those who reported currently being a part of the Covenant Church (not including conference or denominational staff or North Park employees):

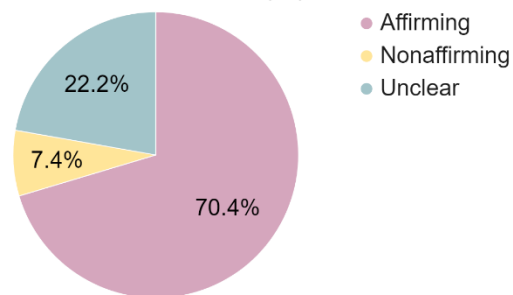
Current or Retired Ordained Pastors (96 Responses)



Current and Former Church Chairs and Board Members (48)

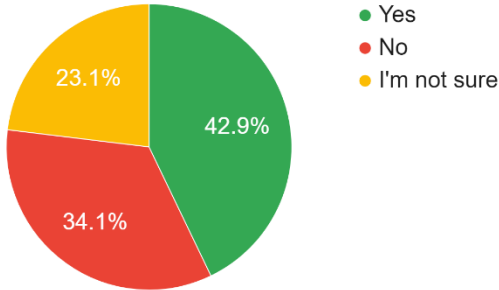


Current Member or Attender (54)

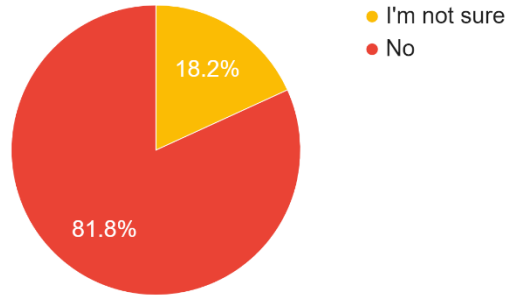


Selected responses to Section 3, Question #11: “Is the ECC, on the whole, a safe place for LGBTQ+ people?”

Current Pastor (92)



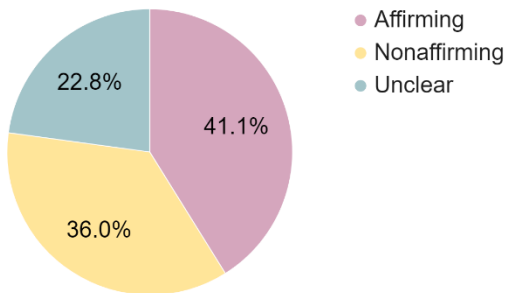
People who answered "Yes" or "Maybe" to being LGBTQ+ (33)



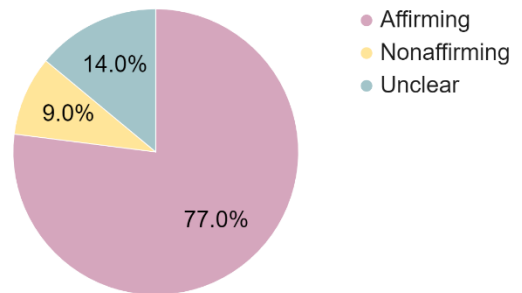
*Observation/Question: There appears to be a significant disconnect between many ECC pastors and queer people regarding the perception of safety in our churches. How do we bridge this gap in knowledge and experience and make our churches more welcoming?*

Selected responses to Section 2, Question #1: Do you have an immediate family member (child, parent, sibling, or spouse) who is LGBTQ+?

People Who Answered "No" (197)



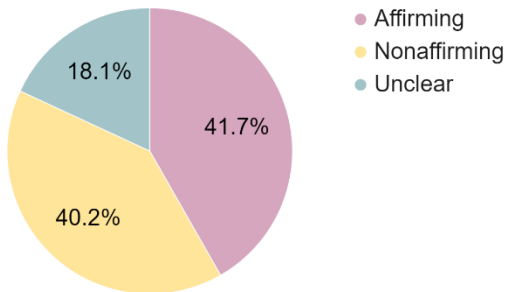
People Who Answered "Yes" (100)



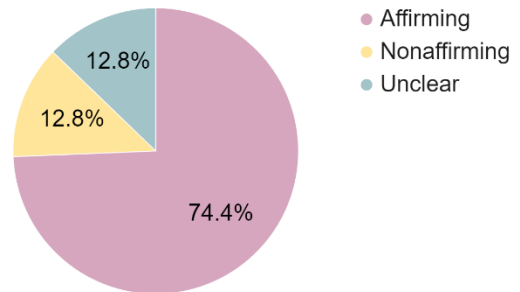
*Observation/Question: It appears as though immediate proximity to queer family members significantly contributes to an affirming perspective. How can we create community spaces for individuals who don't have that experience in their family to learn from those who do?*

Selected responses to Section 2, Question #5: Have you read or are you currently reading any books that call for a fully affirming theology and posture towards LGBTQ+ persons within the broad ecumenical Christian Church?

People Who Have Read None (127)



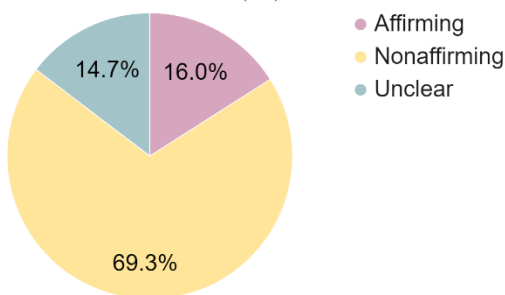
People Who Have Read Three or More (78)



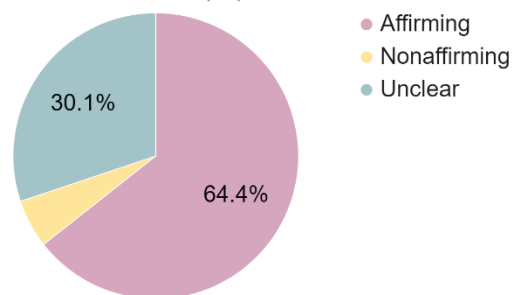
*Observation/Question: There is a significant correlation between reading affirming literature and scholarship and coming to an affirming position. The extent to which this is due to people changing their minds or due to people who are already affirming being more interested in those books is unclear. If people in the first group would be willing to read one or more books and consider the arguments for affirmation in good faith, to what extent would that affect the numbers?*

Selected responses to Section 2, Question #7: Have you ever been involved in a group study, either as a small group, focus group, board, ministry team, pastoral team, whole congregation, or a conference or denominational group, that was organized for the purpose of studying LGBTQ+ inclusion, gay marriage, ordination of queer persons, or other related topics of the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and the Christian faith?

No, and I'm not interested. (75)



No, but I would like to. (73)

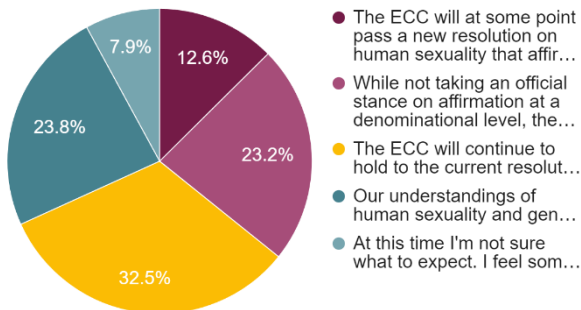


*Observation/Question: This is an incredible difference. Why are so many nonaffirming people who have not participated in any kind of group study so unwilling to do so? What do they have to lose?*

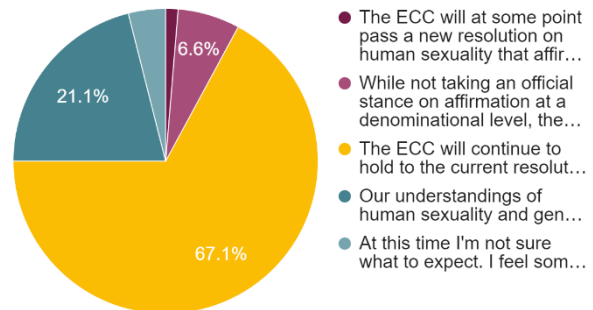
Selected responses to Section 3, Question #10: What do you *expect* will be the long-term trajectory of the ECC regarding queer inclusion and affirmation? (Excepting write-in responses.)

- The ECC will at some point pass a new resolution on human sexuality that affirms the validity of same-sex marriage and relationships as having equal moral status at opposite-sex relationships as well as honoring the dignity of transgendered persons.
- While not taking an official stance on affirmation at a denominational level, the ECC will end its current policy of discipline and removal of pastors and congregations whose ministry to queer persons leads them to blessing marriages, effectively allowing the matter of affirmation to be decided on a church-by-church basis.
- The ECC will continue to hold to the current resolution on human sexuality and take disciplinary action against pastors and congregations that go against it.
- Our understandings of human sexuality and gender will prove to be so divisive that they will lead to a denominational split.
- At this time, I'm not sure what I expect. I feel some degree of ambivalence and am not ready to make a definitive statement.

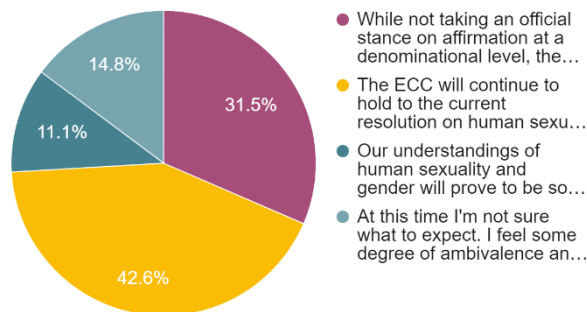
Affirming (151)



Nonaffirming (76)



Unclear (54)



*Observation/Question: Though a plurality of each group is inclined to expect that the ECC will not change its position at all in the foreseeable future, the affirming group is far more likely to expect the denomination to move toward openness to same-sex marriage and somewhat more likely to expect a denominational split. How might we bring these two groups together to collaborate on a shared vision for the future of the Covenant?*

## Agreements for Good Faith Dialogue

Having seen the discord that has developed and continues to simmer within the Evangelical Covenant Church, both through the historical witness and from the recent survey responses, it is vital for the health and long-term viability of the denomination that proactive and substantive steps be taken to disengage from a climate recurrently marked by anxiousness, exasperation, and antipathy. The institutional health of the Church requires deeper engagement with its critics, especially those locating their critique from within. Health and wholeness for each of its members must be the priority and not simply comfort in service of an imagined status quo. To that end, it is essential for all parties involved in conversations surrounding sexuality and gender and their ethical and social implications for the Covenant community to agree to engage their interlocutors with openness, integrity, and in good faith.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of agreements to facilitate good faith dialogue in these, and related conversations. Some of these agreements may be challenging for some individuals to accept or hold onto if they are inexperienced in the broader discourse of sexuality, Christian ethics, theology, and Biblical criticism that has been ongoing for the past several decades. Take some time to reflect on the implications for your own conversations that would come from pledging yourself to these agreements.

We will start and end with the commitment we share as Christians to follow in the Way of Jesus.

### **1. Jesus is *always* on the side of the oppressed.**

Liberation theologian Rev. Dr. James H. Cone once wrote, “The Christian community, therefore, is that community that freely becomes oppressed, because they know that Jesus himself has defined humanity’s liberation in the context of what happens to the little ones.”<sup>229</sup>

We see this orientation towards the oppressed, the marginalized, those cast out from the dominant society, from the very start of Jesus’ ministry, in the proclamation from the book of Isaiah in his first sermon preached in the synagogue of Nazareth:

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<sup>229</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Seabury Press, 1975).

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set free those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>230</sup>

In his book *Might From the Margins*, Dennis Edwards, Dean of North Park Theological Seminary, wrote, “Those who have been oppressed are the best teachers of the way of Christ.”<sup>231</sup> As practitioners of the Way, we must always be mindful of how we, by word or by deed, are calling attention to the injustice we see in our communities, or else maintaining complicity in it.

## **2. God reveals Godself through the beauty and complexity of Creation.**

From the Book of Psalms:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth  
and their words to the end of the world.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Luke 4:16b-21, NRSVue

<sup>231</sup> Dennis Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, (Herald Press, 2020), 58.

<sup>232</sup> Psalm 19:1-4, NRSVue

From Paul's Letter to the Romans

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.<sup>233</sup>

From the Gospel of Luke

He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."<sup>234</sup>

Throughout Scripture, we see an affirmation that God's creation, which he calls good, is a witness to his nature and character and that a fundamental way of understanding human nature is that we bear the *Imago Dei*; the image of God.

### **3. As Protestants, we affirm the universal priesthood of all believers.**

In light of the incarnation of Christ and the intercession of the Holy Spirit,<sup>235</sup> we do not require human intermediaries. Each of us is equipped for confession, prayer, and for reading scripture.

### **4. The Bible is not a systematic theology.**

The Bible, by which we mean the sixty-six books of Protestant Canon, is a diverse library of texts written by dozens of authors over the course of hundreds of years. These authors wrote in different cultural and temporal contexts and were not always necessarily aware or concerned about developing highly coherent, harmonious doctrines. The Bible, as a whole, is not univocal about every topic, and in some cases contains contradictory statements.

When Christians read the Bible, we are always interpreting. We must negotiate the text, which means that to draw theological or ethical conclusions we sometimes have to prioritize some texts and subordinate others. We develop theologies by reading in community and inviting the prophetic work of the Spirit.

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<sup>233</sup> Romans 1:20, NRSVue

<sup>234</sup> Luke 19:40, NRSVue

<sup>235</sup> Romans 8:26-27

This view of the Bible *is traditional to the Covenant*. The Covenant resource paper *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible* was written, in part, to help us navigate the diversity of interpretations that we as Christians are inclined to come to.

We are well aware of both the diversity of readings and the value of that diversity...

As the Evangelical Covenant Church becomes more and more diverse (which we believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit), we must be attuned and sensitive to the various lenses through which we read the Bible... We must be sensitive enough to listen well to others' reading with lenses different from our own...

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...

None of us has the breadth of experience, intellectual skill, social sensitivity, or spiritual depth to interpret the Scriptures alone...

We have worked hard not to allow particular interpretations of texts to take precedence over the text itself to guide our life together...

We recognize these writings for what they are in their original historical and cultural contexts. We realize that there is a distance between us and the first readers of Scripture... All our intellectual capacities are brought to the task of interpretation, and we make use of available information and scholarly tools to bridge the gap between the ancient text and our own lives...<sup>236</sup>

## **5. People find themselves drawn to faith communities for different reasons.**

For some, it is essential to find a community that affirms their deeply held beliefs. For others, it is more about social identity and relationships. Others still are drawn to being in a community oriented towards justice and care. The point is that within a certain faith community, congregation, conference, or denomination, we cannot just assume that every member holds the same set of beliefs, or even that those beliefs are a priority for their inclusion. Not everyone who comes into our churches seeking belonging or a spiritual encounter is convinced of the minutiae of the doctrine.

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<sup>236</sup> *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, 2-4.

## **6. The Covenant Church has a rich history of maintaining diverse if not contradictory doctrinal positions.**

[We] read Scripture charitably with regard to differing interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs... The Covenant's emphasis on "life together" in Christ as the unifying bond has profoundly shaped our understanding of both faith and Scripture. This commitment has historically kept Covenanters united in times when it would have been easier to divide over such issues as baptism, atonement, or the nature of the inspiration of Scripture...

We are committed to the core of the Christian faith, but differences on matters where Christians have historically disagreed are no grounds for division. Rather they are an opportunity for reaching out to each other, for growth and for mutual instruction.<sup>237</sup>

## **7. The affirming position of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Church IS BIBLICAL.**

To be clear, both affirming and non-affirming views are "biblical" in the sense that they can be supported by arguments that are derived from certain interpretations of certain biblical texts. My point in emphasizing the former is that a common uninformed argument that has been used to dismiss and demonize affirming Christians is to claim, contra evidence, that their conclusions are informed purely by secular intrusion or the abandonment of scriptural authority. This argument ignores the scholarship done by faithful, orthodox, and in many cases theologically conservative Christians that points to a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality than what has been traditionally understood. Many of the voices, both outside and inside of the Covenant Church, who are advocating for this expansive and inclusive view, do so with a deep and abiding respect and devotion to scripture. Declaring otherwise has no place in good-faith conversation.

Three such voices have been referenced previously in this report:

1) Jack Rogers: The late Dr. Rogers was a minister and professor of theology at Fuller Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary. In 2001 he was elected to be the moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); essentially the honorary head of the church. His book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*<sup>238</sup> is a

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<sup>237</sup> *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, 4.

<sup>238</sup> See note 11 on page 10.

detailed and exhaustively footnoted interrogation of the Bible, church history, and Protestant tradition in which he comes away with an unequivocal recommendation to the church of affirmation and inclusion of gay people. He was 75 as of the publication of the second edition (2009), and described having read from the Bible every day since he was in junior high. He writes

What is so astonishing about this experience is that after all this time, there is still so much more to discover about God's revelation in Scripture. I've been specifically studying the biblical texts as they relate to homosexuality since 1993, yet I still feel that I have just scratched the surface in terms of understanding all that is there.<sup>239</sup>

2) David Gushee: Dr. Gushee is a Baptist pastor, Christian ethicist, and professor at Mercer University. He was at various points the President of the American Academy of Religion and the President of the Society of Christian Ethics. His book, *Changing Our Mind*,<sup>240</sup> offers a step-by-step, argument-by-argument breakdown of how the traditionalist arguments used to exclude gay and transgender Christians do not have the rhetorical weight that those arguing them claim to have. He challenges the assertion that changing our minds about certain aspects of sexual ethics and mores necessarily implies a lack of respect for scripture or a corruption of the core tenets of the gospel. He writes,

Those of us who are in the process of making a paradigm leap toward full acceptance of LGBTQ people are sometimes accused of “abandoning the Gospel.” This is a very serious charge. Are those who level it saying that the Good News that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19), and that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16) is compromised when Christians propose a rethinking of one aspect of Christian sexual ethics? That's quite a claim!<sup>241</sup>

3) Richard Hays: The late Dr. Hays was an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and a professor of the New Testament at both Yale and Duke Divinity Schools. He is one of the most widely cited New Testament scholars of the last 50 years. His book,

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<sup>239</sup> Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 128.

<sup>240</sup> See note 122 on page 44.

<sup>241</sup> Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 78.

*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*,<sup>242</sup> is a standard text in many religious studies departments and seminaries. In chapter 16, he laid out his moral understanding of homosexuality, as informed by New Testament texts, concluding that same-sex partnerships were, in fact, a sin. After thinking about it for 20+ years, he changed his mind. His book, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, co-written with his son Christopher, eschews analysis of the "clobber verses" in favor of a more expansive look at the entire canon and a recognition of repeating themes of the expanding inclusion of various peoples into the family of God. One of his principal theses is summarized in this selection:

The vision we have presented in this book, then, constitutes a parade example of moral judgment as metaphor-making: the task of "placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated in the text." When we make this kind of imaginative connection, we perceive that faithfulness to scripture requires not just following rules or repeating prohibitions; instead, it requires watching and listening to discern where the Spirit is at work.<sup>243</sup>

While one is free to disagree with their arguments and conclusions, one cannot in good conscience dismiss these learned and devoted Christians and their work as being "unbiblical" or a mere capitulation to the shifting sands of cultural depravity. As Covenanter Philip Keillor wrote, "We must not allow ourselves to think that those who differ with us on the matter of homosexuality are less Christian or even less committed to Scripture than we are."<sup>244</sup>

## **8. When we have theological disagreements, we must respond to the arguments presented and not to made-up ones.**

It is so easy to fall into the trap of presuming to know the motivations and rationalizations that inform each other's understanding about a topic. Attacking straw men may give rhetorical satisfaction in the moment, but ultimately weakens one's position and calls into question one's integrity. For example, framing side-A gay Christians as simply "wanting to justify their own sin", overlooks their legitimate

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<sup>242</sup> See note 12 on page 10.

<sup>243</sup> Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 214.

<sup>244</sup> Keillor, "Redefining." See note 102 on page 37.

testimony to loving and committed partnership, as well as their fidelity to scripture and commitment to following Jesus.

**9. Our relationship to the queer community must be informed by our intentional proximity to LGBTQ+ people.**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual people are not merely abstractions or topics of conversation. Neither are they a problem to be solved or a line item on a checklist. They are fully realized, embodied, and exquisite human beings who exhibit creativity, joy, passion, connection, friendship, love, and who we, as Christians, understand to be beloved children of God. It is inappropriate to arrive at decisions or to construct policies which directly affect their lives and their capacity for relationships in the Church without intentionally including them.

David Gushee writes,

*We must highlight the human costs*—which involves attending to the real human beings affected. Engage people’s hearts, not just their minds, with the real human beings who suffer under [heterosexist] teaching. No conversation about ‘the LGBTQ issue’ should any longer take place without hearing the voice of LGBTQ people themselves.<sup>245</sup>

Gay Evangelical author and activist Justin Lee draws inspiration from a popular television character (one of my personal favorites):

In an episode of the popular TV series *Ted Lasso*, the title character wisely recommends, "Be curious, not judgmental" as a good approach to handling conflict. In other words, before we jump to conclusions about someone, we ought to take the time to be curious about them and ask questions to learn more about where their views come from and what makes them tick. When we do, we'll often find that our assumptions about them were wrong. We might still disagree with their views, but our curiosity can help us understand them better, and that's a vital part of practicing empathy.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 101.

<sup>246</sup> Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, (Worthy, 2012, 2024) 261.

## **10. Homosexuality is not a mental illness or psychological disorder.**

The American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM in 1974, a process which was fully realized by 1987.<sup>247</sup> Major health organizations around the world recognize homosexuality as a normal and generally positive variation of human sexuality. In a joint statement with the American Psychological Association, the APA wrote:

The research on homosexuality is very clear. Homosexuality is neither mental illness nor moral depravity. It is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality. Study after study documents the mental health of gay men and lesbians. Studies of judgment, stability, reliability, and social and vocational adaptiveness all show that gay men and lesbians function every bit as well as heterosexuals.<sup>248</sup>

Being gay, *per se*, does not regularly cause emotional distress, nor is it regularly associated with clinically significant impairment of social functioning. It confers no more pathological behavior nor negative externalities than being straight.

## **11. There is no link between same-sex partnership and instability or social disorder.**

The American Anthropological Association has written,

The results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies. The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association strongly opposes a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexual couples.<sup>249</sup>

Speaking out against the violent rhetoric often used to attack gay and lesbian people, the late evangelical ethicist Lewis B. Smedes once asked,

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<sup>247</sup> "When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder," Psychology Today, June 24, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201509/when-homosexuality-stopped-being-a-mental-disorder>

<sup>248</sup> American Psychological Association, "Statement on Homosexuality," July 1994.

<sup>249</sup> American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Marriage and the Family," September 2004.

What danger to straight people is posed by homosexuals? Some say that they are a threat to the family, but none tell us how. Some fear that they might abuse our children, but no facts have ever been adduced to show that they are any more likely to do so than heterosexual people are. Do homosexuals threaten to invade our homes, steal our property, rape our daughters? What we know is that homosexual men are murdered by heterosexual people just for being gay; what we also know is that there is no record of a heterosexual being murdered for not being gay. Why, then, I wonder, in a world of violence, starving children, cruel tyrannies, and natural disasters, are Christian people so steamed up about the harmless and often beneficent presence of gays and lesbians among us?<sup>250</sup>

## **12. Homosexuality is intrinsic and unchanging.**

We must be willing to acknowledge the fact that gay people exist and they experience physical attraction, romance, and sexuality differently than straight people. Efforts to change the sexual orientation of gay persons through conversion therapy or ex-gay counseling have been largely disastrous and tragic. Consider this section from Bridget Eileen Rivera's book, *Heavy Burdens*:

Exodus International was the flagship program for the ex-gay movement. Founded in the mid-1970s, it grew to a budget of more than one million dollars with over four hundred ministries across seventeen countries. But problems riddled the organization. Cofounder Michael Bussee abandoned Exodus in 1979 to be with his lover, another Exodus leader, and admitted decades later, "I never saw one of our members or other Exodus leaders... become heterosexual, so deep down I knew that it wasn't true." In 2000, Exodus chairman John Paulk divorced his wife and announced, "I do not believe that reparative therapy changes sexual orientation; in fact, it does great harm to many people." In 2013, president Alan Chambers issued a formal apology in which he admitted that he had "ongoing same-sex attractions" and said, "For quite some time, we've been imprisoned in a worldview that's neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical." The organization folded that year in disgrace.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Fortress Press, 1999), 77.

<sup>251</sup> Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*, (Brazos Press, 2021) 52-53.

Furthermore, Stanford Medicine researchers have linked structured attempts to change an LGBTQIA+ person's sexual orientation or gender identity to greater symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidality.<sup>252</sup>

### **13. LGBTQ+ people are equally as deserving of affection, companionship, family, and love as straight, heteronormative people.**

Coretta Scott King once said, "Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood."<sup>253</sup> We must not allow our personal biases or inherited traditions to lead us to any kind of posture or action that would not fully affirm the humanity, dignity, and worth of LGBTQ+ people.

### **14. Gay, transgender, and queer Christians are testifying to spiritual abuse.**

Heteronormativity and heterosexism can blind us to the realities of the experiences of many LGBTQ+ persons within the Church. The power of the dominant culture in defining what is or what should be deemed "normal" cannot be overstated. It is imperative that we lean in close and listen to the testimony of queer Christians. Here are a few of their voices:

Activist and religious trauma coach for queer Christians Mike Maeshiro gave an impassioned and unfiltered response to the spiritual abuse he and his clients and friends have undergone and witnessed:

I watch queer adults in my office bawl their eyes out when they feel safe enough to admit how damaging it was to have homophobic pseudo-theology imposed on them. Often, I cry with them. Today, I'm not grieving, I'm angry.

There are people with entire careers still doing the very harm my job is to help heal. It's nauseating

To the "ex-gay," Side B and other iterations of homophobia masquerading as a ministry: I wholeheartedly condemn your work.

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<sup>252</sup> Krista Conger, "Conversion practices linked to depression, PTSD and suicide thoughts in LGBTQIA+ adults," Stanford Medicine News Center, September 30, 2024. <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2024/09/conversion-practices-lgbt.html>

<sup>253</sup> Coretta Scott King, in a speech at the Palmer Hilton Hotel, quoted in the *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1998.

I don't care about how you interpret the Bible, how you drink deep of heterosexist culture and embrace self-loathing and call it spiritual. Your message harms already vulnerable people, leaving them with lasting trauma and some to the point of ending their own lives. You also embolden and perpetuate bigoted hatred toward the LGBTQ+ community. The impact of your disgusting ministry is death.

To every queer person who is allowing themselves to be used by the Evangelical indoctrination machine with your internalized homophobia and traitorous platforms, I am repulsed by what you are doing. Hear me: you are wrong.

Today, I am infuriated by your hypocrisy and selfishness. Get actual help. See a therapist. Listen to someone outside of Evangelicalism. Stop calling confirmation bias "research." It is not.

I'm so tired of your derangement. Get out of humanity's way. Get out of God's way. The kingdom you claim to represent is inhibited by your delusion. If you want to destroy your own life for the sake of approval by the straights, that's your [prerogative]. Just be quiet about it.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are." – Matthew 23:15<sup>254</sup>

The Evangelical Covenant Church has its own voices testifying to spiritual and emotional trauma. Have you listened to them? Here is Tyler Krumland, from his book *Love Him Well*<sup>255</sup>, writing about the moment he spoke up at the 2018 Annual Meeting. This was during the Q&A which preceded the vote to install John Wenrich as the new President of the ECC, and not long after Herb Hedstrom's request for a diverse task force to study and report the denomination's stance on homosexuality had been voted down. Krumland described the resounding "Noes" from the voice vote, as "daggers." He writes

Making eye contact with the president on stage, I took a deep breath and said, "Tyler Krumland from First Covenant Church Seattle and North Park Theological Seminary grad. Mr. moderator, this question is for the president elect. In the early 2000s, you were a

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<sup>254</sup> Mike Maeshiro, "I had to clean up my language up for this post," Instagram, December 3, 2025.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/DRztkyEadl/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DRztkyEadl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==)

<sup>255</sup> See note 205 on page 71.

pastor at First Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon, which had a strong relationship with Portland Fellowship a ministry promising transformation and freedom from same-sex desires. A Christian leader with ties to such a ministry is a red flag to many LGBTQ Christians who have endured terrible abuses in similar programs, and to their friends and families who love them. As a Christian who happens to be gay, this is very concerning to me personally. I, like many queer people of faith, have unfortunately been involved with these ministries promising to offer freedom from something we never chose. During my time in one of these online programs, through mentors claiming to act in Christ's name, I was taught to hate myself and how God made me. When the program didn't change me, I lost hope and wondered if taking my life was the only option even though that wasn't what I wanted. It made me feel like I must not love God enough, that I didn't pray hard enough, and that my twenty-five-plus years of trying to change weren't enough. My time in this program has caused lasting anxiety and depression, and today I still struggle with trying to believe God loves me. So please explain your previous relationship with this organization and how your views may or may not have changed."<sup>256</sup>

Andrew Freeman's open letter to Gary Walter,<sup>257</sup> the last post to the *Coming Out Covenant* Blog, also speaks to spiritual abuse:

The first thing I want you to know is that I have been hurt by your words and your leadership. I have read and watched your remarks on this topic over the past year, and I want you to know how some of your words sound to the ears of one who is actually gay: they hurt.

When you describe my sexual orientation merely as an "attraction" that I must "navigate," that hurts. It undermines the legitimacy of the love LGBTQ people feel for their partners. It reduces our relationships to an attraction and denies them any credible depth and meaning. And it suggests that our orientation is a burden rather than a gift. In short, it makes me feel that you haven't taken the time to fully understand me or my life.

When you list my orientation at the end of a list of alleged sexual sins, right after adultery and pornography, that hurts. It is dehumanizing. It takes part of my identity and smacks a negative label on it. And when this is the context for your first mention of the existence of

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<sup>256</sup> Krumland, *Love Him Well*, 316-317.

<sup>257</sup> See note 138 on page 48.

non-heterosexual individuals, it makes it difficult for me to receive anything that follows with a spirit of love and good intent.

When you cloak our denomination's position on same-sex marriage under a broad discussion of "the issue of human sexuality" and say that our position is "a high challenge to all of us", that actually hurts, too. It feels a little like saying "All Lives Matter" at a racial justice rally: Yes, it's technically true, but it misses the point of naming the unequal burden placed on a particular minority group.

When my life is reduced to an "issue", thus making me negatively one-dimensional, that hurts. Why must LGBTQ individuals always be spoken of in such contentious terms? Even within our stated position, can we not affirm that God has equipped LGBTQ individuals with significant gifts for ministry and that we have much to offer the church? We are not an issue, we are the Body of Christ.<sup>258</sup>

The agreement that I'm asking you to commit to is not whether or not the spiritual abuse has happened, or whether the term "abuse" is justified, or whether any abuse, harm, or trauma that may have occurred was "intentional" or not. I'm asking that we first agree that spiritual abuse is being proclaimed. Knowing this, what now shall we do?

**15. Minorities have historically had to fight to communicate to the majority in power that their voices and lives matter.**

In 2023, *Christianity Today* wrote an article about the upcoming vote in the ECC to remove Quest and Awaken from the roster of churches. In the article, Paul Lessard, executive minister of the ECC's church health initiative, was asked about pastors having petitioned the annual gathering to reconsider the position on marriage and about how those petitions have been consistently voted against. His response:

"It's perceived as squashing the conversation, but it is actually the people saying, 'No, we don't want to have that conversation. We don't think we need to open the conversation,'" Lessard told CT.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Freeman, "An Open Letter..."

<sup>259</sup> Megan Fowler, "Two Congregations Force LGBT Debate on Evangelical Covenant Church," *Christianity Today*, updated July 5, 2023. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250706071449/https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/07/awaken-quest-evangelical-covenant-lgbt-division/>

A breathtaking distinction without a difference.

Judy Peterson addressed this in a response to the article posted to Facebook:

In almost all cases the minority position doesn't hold enough power to force a conversation, rather those in power have to concede to having one. In the case of the Evangelical Covenant Church, those holding the conviction that the LGBT community should be fully included in the life of the church have been asking for a conversation within the larger denomination since the 1970's, over 50 years ago...

In the article Paul Lessard, executive minister of the ECC's church health initiative, states that the ECC is not silencing this conversation, but rather the conversation is not being had because a proposal to change the denomination's established position on marriage has never received enough votes to be reconsidered. This, he says, is clear evidence that people don't want to have the conversation. It's almost as if Paul Lessard, a white, male, heterosexual, evangelical, doesn't know what it feels like to be a minority trying to convince the majority that your voice matters.

Being unable to get enough votes to pass a measure that grants institutional equality to a minority population doesn't mean that people don't want to have the conversation. What it means is that the privileged don't want to have a conversation about a subject that doesn't directly [affect] them.<sup>260</sup>

In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, theologian Howard Thurman wrote,

In a society in which certain people or groups—by virtue of economic, social, or political power—have dead-weight advantages over others who are essentially without that kind of power, those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors. Any slight conflict, any alleged insult, any vague whim, any unrelated frustration, may bring down upon the head of the defenseless the full weight of naked physical violence.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Judy Howard Peterson, "Christianity Today recently published this article entitled, 'Two Congregations Force LGBT Debate on Evangelical Covenant Church,'" Facebook, February 4, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/walkingpastor/posts/pfbid026qJNyupJ5EKy8pGhjjdrdmCJfBFJfyPREV9QcumDSwUPZ9bgNejLP8D6bhmeeYWwl>

<sup>261</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Beacon Press, 1996), 3. First published by Abington Press in 1949.

Violence need not be explicitly physical to be both real and harmful. Sometimes it comes in the form of silencing, shutting down, ignoring the desperation, mocking the pain. Sometimes it looks like refusing to listen, to reconsider, to allow one's heart to be moved. Sometimes it looks like celebrating the fracturing of a relationship. Sometimes it looks like paying lip-service to giving a voice to the marginalized, when one's mind has already been made up and the outcome has been predetermined. Sometimes it looks less like brutality and more like *privilege*.

Dennis Edwards reflects on the words of Howard Thurman and how Christians can choose to decenter our focus from the dominant culture and back on Christ:

In light of the toxicity of American Christianity, it's reasonable to wonder now, as Howard Thurman did back in the 1940s, why African Americans, or anyone on the margins of society, would become Christian. I believe that those who have been marginalized have power that is not only unnoticed, but often underutilized. We need to encourage each other to raise our voices and bring all of who we are into Christian service. *We do not need to wait for permission or approval from the dominant culture.* Our power comes, first of all, from Jesus Christ, whose gospel not only is about the life to come but also affects life in the here and now.<sup>262</sup>

## **16. The proper response to pain is healing, not avoidance.**

Many of us can relate to a nagging ailment that can turn into a medical crisis if not promptly treated. We've heard the stories, or perhaps even experienced them ourselves. A persistent cough, an infected cut, a new and aggravating pain in the gut. We have our justifications: "It's not a big deal; it will get better on its own. Going to the doctor for diagnosis and treatment will be uncomfortable, perhaps even costly. I will be inconveniencing other people; they might criticize or resent me. Other people have bigger problems; they have greater need for the resources. I've been taught to tough it out. I have more important things to do with my time. If I self-medicate it will soothe the pain and I won't have to think about it."

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<sup>262</sup> Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, 26. Emphasis mine.

Meanwhile, the cough becomes pneumonia and a trip to the hospital. The infection becomes necrotic and they have to amputate the leg. The pain was from a tumor; the cancer has metastasized.

I'm sorry if I've triggered your hypochondria. The analogy is not perfect, but it is enlightening. Healing requires acceptance. We have to lean into the pain and interrogate it, not merely numb it. It starts with a proper diagnosis. This means calling upon experts and being exposed to their knowledge and training. It may mean getting a *second opinion*. It means listening to the wisdom of those who previously went through the healing process.

### **17. Jesus told us the whole of the law. That should be our hermeneutic.**

By *hermeneutic* I mean the lenses through which we interpret the Bible and derive direction and application for the Christian life. Jesus revealed his priorities in the Gospel of Matthew:

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>263</sup>

Paul echoes this teaching in his letter to the Romans:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.<sup>264</sup>

Let us acknowledge that honestly and seriously engaging with this topic and all of its history and consequences has the potential to cause pain and disorientation for all involved parties. Those who are committed to working together through that discomfort

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<sup>263</sup> Matthew 22:37-40, NRSVue

<sup>264</sup> Romans 13:8-10, NRSVue

do well to remember the core tenet that shapes us as Christians and calls us to relationship with each other. Jack Rogers put it this way:

Jesus is the center of Scripture. It is to Christ that the church witnesses. Jesus taught that to love God and love our neighbor is the heart of the gospel. Jesus welcomed society's outcasts. He reached out to women, children, people of all races and ethnicities, the poor, the disabled, the sick, Gentiles, and, yes, sexual minorities. When we read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' redemptive life and ministry, we can see that both the Old and New Testaments command us to accept those who are different from ourselves.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 135.

## **Questions for the Covenant Church**

Where is the conversation on sexuality, faith, the Bible, and policy heading now, thirty years on from the establishment of the official Covenant position? What kinds of discussions, debates, or topics for deeper study and reflection are we being led into, both out of choice and out of necessity?

Many questions have been left unanswered or have left us with conflicting or confusing responses. The following comprises an incomplete list of questions that require further engagement. They are not intended to be merely a rhetorical exercise; we are all invited to ask these questions of ourselves and our churches and to ponder how they might impact the culture and ministry of the Covenant. As you read them, consider how you might be in a season of being called to wrestle with and speak into these and other related questions.

### **1. What do we mean when we talk about “faith”?**

Is faith primarily about believing or assenting to the right set of ideas? Is it about the strength of will that we have in believing those ideas? Is our litmus test of faith the extent to which we ascribe plenary inspiration to literalistic or plain-text readings of the Bible? Or is faith more about *faithfulness* in patterning our lives in the Way of Jesus? Is it about filtering our reading of the Bible and relationship to the Christian tradition through the lens of Jesus’ love?

### **2. Does a steadfast appeal to tradition frustrate our ability to be transformed by Christ?**

The Christian tradition is the historical witness that has developed both doctrine and practice through centuries of Christian thought. The Covenant tradition traces its roots through the Lutheran branch of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church, the early Mediterranean churches, and down to the Judaistic faith of Jesus and the people of Israel. However, as a multicultural denomination, we have been influenced by all manner of Christian traditions. Our traditions connect us to our ancestors and forebears and to each other through common language and ritual. Some traditions have changed very little in the last two thousand years, but others have been

dramatically altered or outright abandoned. Weaving through both our appeals to tradition and the necessity of change is our commitment to following the Way:

A Way is something that is to be followed, and we cannot follow a Way without leaving where we are now. Walking a path or following a road using maps and compasses are not what we mean by following the Way of Jesus. Instead, we are using "Way" to describe something more like a "Way of life" or "Way of being"; the Way is a person after all.<sup>266</sup>

### **3. What does it mean for us to have a cross at the center of our faith?**

Catholic priest John Cihak once wrote a profound statement on the relationship between God and Jesus:

In the ugliest place of human existence (crucifixion and death) God reveals himself as absolute, total self-giving love... Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, the Christform is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is.<sup>267</sup>

Jesus requires of us, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."<sup>268</sup> What does this look like for each of us? Taking up a cross means sacrificing. What are we willing to sacrifice in the spirit of self-giving love?

### **4. Is it time for the Covenant Church to reevaluate its understanding of the sacraments?**

The Evangelical Covenant Church currently recognizes two sacraments: the Eucharist (communion) and baptism. Marriage is recognized as a blessing and ceremony performed by the church but is not considered a sacrament (other Christian traditions, such as the Catholic Church, do identify marriage as a sacrament). The Covenant has famously extended fellowship to Christians who have had diametrically opposed views of baptism: some wanting to baptize infants, and others believing baptism must follow

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<sup>266</sup> Billie Hoard and Paul Hoard, *Eucontamination: Disgust Theology and the Christian Life*, (Cascade Books, 2025), 51.

<sup>267</sup> John R. Cihak, "Love Alone is Believable: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Apologetics," February 14, 2011.

<https://fatherdavidbirdosb.blogspot.com/2011/02/love-alone-is-believable-hans-urs-von.html>

<sup>268</sup> Luke 9:23, NRSVue

a conscious affirmation of faith. Historically, this has not been a banal difference in opinion. Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were executed by the thousands, in part for practicing rebaptism. Should differing views about marriage, which has now become a literally schismatic issue in the Covenant Church, be accepted in the same way as disagreements about baptism? Should churches be put under disciplinary proceedings and church trials for exclusively practicing only one form of baptism? If gay couples are barred from participating in marriage, which is not a sacrament, should they be denied communion or baptism, which are sacraments? Why or why not? Should marriage be elevated to a holy sacrament?

#### **5. Is congregational polity still the operative model for the Covenant Church?**

Per the 2015 Guidelines<sup>269</sup> it is the local congregation that determines standards for membership, discipline, and leadership. Why then does the Covenant Church not respect the local congregation's determination of marriage celebration for its own members? The vast majority of the tens of thousands of Covenanters from other churches, states, and conferences cannot be party to all of the conversations, learning, and prayer that occurs within a small community of mission friends as they navigate issues of fidelity and inclusion. Why should there be any denomination-wide policy at all over matters of *congregational discernment*?

#### **6. Should the Covenant bind clergy and congregations to other policy papers and resolutions?**

Covenant policy on divorce and remarriage cites the “inflexible commands” that represent “God’s absolute intention” that “marriage is for life.”<sup>270</sup> It acknowledges Jesus’ only exception to that rule as being in cases of adultery. On the topic of women in ministry, the Covenant Church, by way of resolution, calls on *all* members to welcome women (and men) to pastoral roles (including lead pastor), as equal candidates in pastoral search committees, to preach, to serve on church boards, as well

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<sup>269</sup> See note 131 on page 46.

<sup>270</sup> The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Policy Statement,” 2010. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Divorce-and-Remarriage.pdf>

as to roles of chairperson, deacon, and elder.<sup>271</sup> Should the Covenant Executive Board, Board of Ordered Ministry, conference superintendents, or the Annual Meeting seek out pastors and congregations who have been involved in marriage ceremonies of divorced persons with living ex-spouses, or who have flatly refused to consider or hire women for leadership positions, and subject them to discipline up to and including removal of ordination credentials and membership?

## 7. Will membership in Covenant churches require additional affirmations?

The typical and recommended barrier for membership in a Covenant Church is an affirmative response to two questions: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord?” and, “Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct?” These are buttressed by the six Covenant Affirmations, less a confessional statement, and more of an acknowledgment of theological focal points:

- We affirm the centrality of the word of God.
- We affirm the necessity of new birth.
- We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the church.
- We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers.
- We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.<sup>272</sup>

The Annual Meetings of 2019 and 2023 voted *en masse* to vacate the memberships of hundreds of Covenanters. As was previously established, voting out a church isn't kicking out a *building*, it is the disfellowshipping of *people*. Not a single person had ever been accused, let alone convicted, of violating either the two points of our modest membership statement nor any of the six affirmations. Should the Covenant church adopt the membership question, “Do you publicly and privately profess the marriage of one man and one woman as the singular essential boundary for a sexual relationship?” Should we add a seventh Covenant Affirmation—We affirm the moral

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<sup>271</sup> The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Resolution on Women in Ministry,” 2006.

<https://covchurch.org/resolutions/2006-women-in-ministry/>

<sup>272</sup> <https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/>

essentiality of monogamous heterosexual marriage? Hauna Ondrey posed similar questions ahead of the 2019 Annual Meeting:

Beyond this particular vote, as a Covenant we must decide more fundamentally whether to (1) follow to its full, logical conclusion the path of dismissing congregations that are out of harmony with Covenant principles, policies, programs, and institutions; (2) embrace the prohibition of same-sex marriage as the new boundary for congregational membership in the denomination; or (3) hold discerned ethical positions without enforcing congregational compliance, as we have done since 1885.<sup>273</sup>

#### **8. Does the Covenant Church recognize the marriages of gay Covenanters?**

We have established that the Covenant Church does not authorize same-sex marriages, permit clergy to officiate them, allow church facilities to host them, or credential married gay persons. That being said... *married gay Covenanters exist!* They got married somewhere else, and then just... came back. Or perhaps they joined a Covenant church after they were already married. What is the Covenant policy on recognizing and affirming their marital status? Can they be a part of a marriage ministry? Can they take a picture as a family for the church directory? Can they host a baby shower at the church, or dedicate their children during Sunday worship? Can they attend church retreats at Covenant campgrounds and facilities? *Can they share the same room?* It's not enough to say, "We don't have a policy." That is not good enough. I see only a few possible options here. One option: The Covenant Church does not recognize the legitimacy of gay marriage *in any way* and bars same-sex couples from any of the ministries or benefits afforded to heterosexual couples. (In that case, are we trading one standard for another and also petitioning the couple to get a divorce?) Second option: The Covenant Church does not *officiate* same-sex marriages, but otherwise accepts married gay couples in the same way as any other married couple. (In that case, what is the point of not officiating?) Third option: the Covenant Church leaves the inclusion of married gay couples to the discernment of the local congregation. (In that case, why couldn't their marriage ceremony be left to the congregation's discernment?)

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<sup>273</sup> Ondrey, "Beyond Yes or No," 5. See note 20 on page 14.

**9. How are transgender, intersex, and non-binary members expected to experience marriage?**

\*Please don't miss this incredibly important point.\* The existence of intersex and transgender people *dismantles the one-man-one-woman marriage paradigm*. I'll explain. Let's start with two related cases of intersex people: Swyer syndrome and CAIS. Individuals with Swyer syndrome have a genetic mutation which causes complete gonadal dysgenesis, meaning their testes do not fully develop and they typically have a vulva. Individuals with CAIS, which stands for complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, produce testosterone and other androgens, but their bodies do not respond to them. In both cases, these persons have a 46,XY *karyotype*, meaning their 23<sup>rd</sup> pair of chromosomes includes an X and a Y chromosome, typical for a human male. However, they have a traditionally female *phenotype*, meaning their physical sexual dimorphism (genitals, breasts, etc.) is more closely aligned with a typical human female. If a person with Swyer syndrome or CAIS wanted to be married in a Covenant church, what does the policy on human sexuality say about that? One could make the argument that the person is *genetically* male but *physically* female (not a *good* argument, mind you, as gender is less binary and more fluid than perhaps we previously thought). So, are they allowed to marry a man? A woman? Now extend the argument to transgender and nonbinary people. A transgender woman, through hormone replacement and surgery, can achieve something strikingly similar to a woman with CAIS: an XY karyotype with a traditionally female physiology and, more importantly, identity. Can they marry a man? Are they only allowed to marry a woman because they were assigned male at birth? Do we throw up our hands and say, "I guess they just can't get married!" (But if a transgender or intersex woman *can* marry a man... then why can't a gay man?) *Not having an answer or hoping that it just doesn't come up is not an option.*

**10. Should there be Covenant spaces for LGBTQ+ people in relationships, or will our message be "break up or find another church"?**

The promotion of LGBTQ+ relationships is something that threatens a pastor's ordination and employment. It is *the only thing* that has led to the involuntary removal

of an entire congregation. *It's kind of a big deal.* The Covenant's position is based on a particular biblical interpretation that frames gay romance and sexuality as essentially sinful, or at the very least in violation of God's created order. If that is the case, then if Covenant churches allow gay couples as participants or even members, are they not tacitly affirming them in their persistent and unrepentant state of sin? Would we offer membership to a person actively involved in an affair, or who was habitually abusing their children? Are those sins somehow different than the sin of being gay and in love? *If they are, then how so?*

It seems as though the Covenant's boundary-delineating policies concerning the romantic interpersonal relationships of LGBTQ+ people are primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with young, inexperienced, naïve, unmarried individuals. I am unaware of any significant content in any Covenant resolution, guideline, position paper, or *Embrace* resource, which addresses mature, self-actualized, confident, committed, gay partnerships or marriages. What does the ECC's "standard" of "marriage between one man and one woman" require of the already-married gay couples that darken our doors? Do we resign ourselves to the charitable support, encouragement, and inclusion of their families, or do we gently lead them on a journey towards alignment with "the standard", which would necessarily include *advocating for a divorce*? Or perhaps we direct them to an affirming church which would be more accepting of their relationship, which strikes me as hopelessly cynical.

In either case, by tacitly accepting the marital relationships of *some* gay people, or by pressuring them to subordinate their partnerships to the authority of the church, what message are we sending to the queer youth in our congregations? Micah Witham addressed the same question in his opening statement to the ministerium:<sup>274</sup>

The question I would invite you to ask yourselves is when your kids, or your friends' kids come out to you—and they will—and they say they love Jesus and want to follow Jesus but don't want to live alone. What do we say to them? They either leave our

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<sup>274</sup> See note 212 on page 74.

fellowship (and they are leaving our fellowship, by the way) and they find other spiritual communities to be a part of, or they leave spiritual community altogether.<sup>275</sup>

### **11. What *precisely* is the boundary for married gay Covenanters?**

There is no explicit prohibition on gay persons in the Covenant being husbands or wives, they just can't be married *in* a Covenant church. Got it. Married gay Covenanters cannot be *ordained pastors*; this we have established. But where exactly is the line in which out-and-proud, side-A, dating or married gay Christians can be involved in an official capacity in a Covenant church? You pick the cut off (but be prepared to justify your answer and cite your evidence): Weekly attender... set up/tear down crew... audio-visual team member... greeter... giving a personal testimony in church... public prayer... public reading of scripture... taking the offering or distributing communion... giving the announcements... volunteer in the nursery... volunteer in children's ministry... volunteer in youth ministry... on the worship team... leading a bible study... deacon... paid (non-ordained) staff... worship *leader*... church board member... adult Sunday school teacher... church board *chair*... occasional (non-ordained) preacher... youth retreat speaker... whole church retreat speaker... conference staff... regional conference speaker... North Park staff... North Park *faculty*... denominational staff... North Park *seminary faculty*... national conference speaker... published author for Covenant Press (oops, already happened)... President of the Evangelical Covenant Church (maybe one has to be ordained for this position, I don't know).

### **12. Does not the Covenant's emphasis on social justice and reconciliation demand that we include LGBTQ+ people in the conversation?**

Methodist minister Ken Carder had a paradigm changing conversation during his time on the Council of Bishops for the UMC. He wrote,

I felt that the persistent discussion of homosexuality within the Council and other denominational circles was distracting us from fully addressing economic injustice. I shared my concern with a friend, a theological consultant to the Initiative. His response

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<sup>275</sup> Witham, "Opening Statement."

lodged in my conscience: “But, Ken, you can’t portion God’s justice for one group and ignore it for another.”<sup>276</sup>

Ken Sehested of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America put it similarly, “Matters of justice cannot be segregated.”<sup>277</sup> Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of current and now former Covenanters are testifying to some level of *trauma* suffered at the hands of the denomination. This present report proves it. Whether or not you feel that the decisions and actions leading to that trauma were in some way justified, the question remains: *what are we going to do about it?* This is a naked and open-ended question, I don’t have an answer for you. Or is it the case that as a denomination we feel we can insist on racial reconciliation and justice without doing the same for queer people?

### **13. Are we so committed to living into God’s unconditional love even if it means going against the institution of the church?**

Following the Way of Jesus and conforming to the ideologies and idiosyncrasies of a church as political organization are not the same thing. This is why the issue of *dissent* has been so important to the Covenant since its inception, and also why the denomination has sought to manage and confine it. At what point are we willing to jeopardize our positions of comfort and privilege to enter into public dissent as a means of expressing the radical love of Jesus? Former Nazarene pastor James Travis Young wrote, “I believe that tending the *real* flame—to live in the power of God’s love—is to accept and give love without condition, without guilt—and if necessary, *without the church*.”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Kenneth L. Carder, “Why I Changed My Mind about Homosexuality and the Church,” *United Methodist Insights*, September 26, 2018. <https://um-insight.net/perspectives/why-i-changed-my-mind-about-homosexuality-and-the-church/>

<sup>277</sup> Ken Sehested, “Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn’t,” in Wink et al., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*, 51. See note 250 on page 152.

<sup>278</sup> James Travis Young, “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” *Patheos*, December 17, 2024. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/sacredoutcasts/2024/12/we-are-never-ever-getting-back-together/>

**14. “Can we maintain the kind of personal relationships required in a Christian fellowship without any limitations other than that we submit to the authority of the Bible as the revelation of God’s will, or must we return to uniform dogmas and carefully defined interpretations of Scripture to help us understand one another?”<sup>279</sup>**

So the question was posed in 1963. I’m not sure we’ve reached a satisfying resolution. Our documentation points to “Yes,” while our behavior points quite explicitly to “No.” Whichever answer we give, we need to be consistent.

**15. To what extent should Covenant pastors have the freedom to make decisions about the needs and best interests of their parishioners?**

Here is a remarkable comment on the responsibility of Covenant ministers from the 1997 Annual Meeting:

We acknowledge that by virtue of our licensing, ordination, and call to ministry, we take on a responsibility to be trustworthy stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). This means that we view those to whom we minister as a part of a sacred trust from God. It is our responsibility 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. Hence, we act in the best interests of our parishioners, *even when this action does not serve our needs or interests.*<sup>280</sup>

What if the best interests of a parishioner run counter to a position statement or policy. Perhaps it’s easy for some to say, “Well then the pastor should forfeit his or her credentials.” But does not the fact that the pastor(s) is testifying to “danger and harm” require us to earnestly reevaluate the policy?

**16. Is it even possible for delegates at the Annual Meeting to make these kinds of monumental decisions in good conscience and good faith?**

I partially quoted this section from Leland Anderson’s letter to John Wenrich preceding the 2019 Annual Meeting, but it bears repeating:

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<sup>279</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 28. See note 57 on page 25.

<sup>280</sup> *Covenant Yearbook*, 1997, 364. Emphasis mine.

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 theological debate so as to render a just and fair decision relating to termination of the lifetime employment of another human being. Such a consequence will permanently dislocate not only the individual but also his family and congregation. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that no one will have time to explore the biases, motives, background, interests, and prejudices of these adjudicators. The suggestion will be made that they will “try their best,” but “try their best” to do what? If the purpose is to encourage them to maximize punishment rather than to render a fair, impartial and reasoned sentence, they will render a judgment contrary to all notions of fairness and also contrary to the character and nature of the Holy Spirit. I sincerely doubt that the will of God can be discerned in a time limited, scope limited two-hour discussion among six hundred people.<sup>281</sup>

**17. “Do you really believe that a church’s decision on welcoming gay people is a matter on which the faith stands or falls?”<sup>282</sup>**

I pose this question to the non-affirming side with two different possible meanings. One take is this: does an open and affirming view of marriage otherwise negate a church’s witness to the Gospel and its viewpoint or discussion surrounding core topics of the Christian faith including God, Jesus, atonement, salvation, and sanctification? Does it bear any significant weight or is it more of a tangential issue? The second take is this: should the Church be so committed to a narrow and exclusive policy of marriage that it creates enough strife such that a significant percentage of gay and affirming Christians leave the congregation and possibly even the faith altogether? *This is happening right now.*

**18. Do you think it is possible for the Covenant Church to reach true unanimity in its current position on human sexuality?**

Even if the Covenant Church remains as hardline in its position on same-sex marriage or goes even further in its treatment of gay members, there is still going to be a

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<sup>281</sup> L. Anderson, “Letter to John Wenrich.” See note 188 on page 63.

<sup>282</sup> Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy*, 6. See note 12 on page 10.

growing contingent of affirming Covenanters bubbling under the surface. Pressuring and even voting for congregations and pastors to leave is not going to consolidate the denomination's quest for full agreement because people keep changing their minds and kids and young adults (and some grown adults) keep coming out. Kicking out all the wrong types of people is not going to change this. Furthermore, why should we expect that in a denomination that professes theological and ecclesiological diversity, and in a world where historic Christian denominations have chosen to love and accept gay people, that the ECC would not attract an affirming contingent?

**19. What do you say after someone you love says, "I'm gay"?**

If you are a parent or imagine that you may one day be a parent, take a moment and consider what it would be like for your child to come out to you and ask for your acceptance. If you are a pastor: would you officiate their wedding? If you are not: would you give them your blessing? What would you be willing to sacrifice by saying yes or no?

**20. Covenant Pastors: If you said "yes" ("I would officiate my gay child's wedding"), even if you still may not be able to go further and commit to being fully affirming and inclusive, then do you believe that insisting that Covenant pastors quit their calling and give up their credentials before doing so is truly a fruitful solution?**

To what end? What do other non-affirming pastors or members gain by insisting that you, their colleague, either subordinate your own children to the institution or blow up the entire conglomerate that is your career/ministry/friendships?

## Conclusion

This report has identified and detailed an undercurrent within the Evangelical Covenant Church which is a witness to suppression, to animosity, to loss of cultural identity and cohesion, and to spiritual harm. It is not claiming to reflect a totalizing narrative of the Covenant or of every person's experience in it, but it is affirming of and respectful towards a substantial existing minority. Refrains of protest are anticipated: "Why are you being so negative? Why aren't you talking about all the good that's happening in the Covenant? My experience in the Covenant has been wonderful... can we just change the subject and talk about something else?"

From the outset of this project I have been asking myself, "How can I speak with clarity and forthrightness in advocacy with a tone that invites people into reflection, conversation, and curiosity, rather than simply condemning?" I'm not sure that I have the ability to do that in a way that will make every reader feel comfortable and safe. I'm also not convinced that that should be my job. A couple of years ago I became more aware of the hurt and exhaustion that LGBTQ+ Christians experience, sometimes daily, in justifying both their inclusion in the church and even their very existence. I made a commitment that should I witness a queer person being misrepresented, attacked, abused, or whose dignity is being questioned, that, if it is in my purview to do so, I have a responsibility to speak up and not allow that behavior to go unchallenged. Presenting such a challenge may cause some offense or some hurt feelings. But as womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas taught me, as I sat in the audience during her lecture from the stage at Awaken Church, "An education that never discomforts never transforms."<sup>283</sup>

As I mentioned in the introduction, this report is not meant to present a fully articulated apologetic for LGBTQ+ inclusion or for same-sex marriage. The point is to explore ways of honoring multiple viewpoints. This requires intentional structures to ensure safety and authenticity. This discussion MUST be informed by the lived experience of queer people and it must also be informed by the voices of those who left

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<sup>283</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, "What Price Freedom?" (lecture, Theology Beer Camp, Saint Paul, MN, October 17, 2025).

the Covenant because they found the denomination's policies on sexuality too restrictive. That is the point of the survey; it is meant to give an incomplete peek into their experiences in a way that has not been allowed by the institution. There is a danger in assuming that Annual Meeting votes to sanction and remove pastors and congregations provide us with any kind of clarity about how the broader congregation is considering, experiencing, or evolving on questions about sexuality and gender.

The Christian tradition is not monolithic. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that there are 45,000 Christian denominations in the world.<sup>284</sup> All these different ecclesiological entities have an incredible diversity of theology and praxis and there is no reason to believe that diversity will not continue to grow. What the Covenant has historically done is to take various Christians with diverse perspectives and to hold to keeping that diversity in one church rather than splitting off and dividing.

The maneuver to disfellowship churches over what amounts to diversity of thought in one area of Christian ethics raises deeply existential questions. Is true fellowship a Covenant-defining value? How do we see the person who dissents? Do we see them as family or as pariah? Yet again, the *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* report is instructive here:

Such freedom in our personal relationships will also lead to a consideration for the contribution of minorities. 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.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>

<sup>285</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 29.

## **Naming the Harm, Acknowledging the Pain**

We must have the courage to be honest about the current state of the Covenant, even if it is hard to accept or if it contradicts our preconceptions...

***The Evangelical Covenant Church has for the last thirty years been engaged in a campaign of systematic marginalization and disenfranchisement of LGBTQ+ people, their allies, and those who publicly challenge the denomination's position on human sexuality.***

This is neither an exaggeration nor is it a deluded assessment. It is unambiguously confirmed by the historical record and by personal testimony as demonstrated in this report. A number of individuals in positions of leadership have, acting in bad faith, conspired, organized, and executed plans to delegitimize, demonize, and expel persons who threatened their cultural cache in the American Evangelical arena. A great many more members, believing in the vision and mission of the institution, bought their propaganda wholesale, or else insulated themselves from properly apprehending the magnitude of the harm that was being done. I, myself, confess to having played my own part in this role for some time. Queer people are easy targets; they are already an oft-maligned minority, and with a half-dozen decontextualized verses running cover for any ethical concerns, it's an easy move to believe that the Bible provides a clear and uncontroversial answer to the sexuality question, or that it's even capable of doing so. It is also easy to have so much love for a community, and such a desire to maintain its strength, so as to develop blind spots to areas of genuine injustice.

Critics might presume that I am accusing the ECC of blatant homophobia and that the denomination's *Embrace* resources refute this claim. That is not precisely what I'm doing. I'm accusing the ECC, as an institution, of *heterosexism*.

An analogy might be helpful here. Theologian Reggie Williams writes about how, in discussions of racism, we must distinguish between words like *xenophobia*, *prejudice*, and *White supremacy*. Xenophobia is essentially "an attitude of unwelcome for strangers, foreigners, or anything unknown," while prejudice is "bias or contempt that results from unsubstantiated information about others." But White supremacy is something different. Williams says that White supremacy "...is not about your feelings, which is to say, it is not

a matter of liking or disliking people of different races... Hatred and harm are secondary. The primary thing is longing for an *idealized community*.”<sup>286</sup>

If *homophobia* is more akin to *xenophobia* or *prejudice*, then *heterosexism*, at least in the way I’m using the term here, is more like *White supremacy*. While I have little doubt that some amount of homophobia permeates the ECC, my criticism is aimed more precisely at the denomination’s ingrained culture of heterosexism. The actions of the Covenant Church point towards a longing for an idealized community in which traditional models of sexuality, and of a clear gender binary paradigm, are prioritized over the messy complexity of diverse embodied people of faith. Heterosexism teaches us that to be cisgender and straight is to be “normal.” (That was literally one of the write-in responses to question #10 in section 1 of the survey. “What is your sexual orientation?” “Normal.”) Heterosexism teaches us that to be cisgender and straight is to be by default the protagonist in the story. To paraphrase Dr. Williams, “To resist [heterosexism] is to encounter centuries of embedded ideology masquerading as reality.”

Institutionalized religious heterosexism presupposes a divine order to nature, rationalized by heteronormative readings of Genesis 2 and 3 and Romans 1, and then forces individuals to fit into that paradigm, unaware or unconcerned about the harm that might be caused, while ignoring calls for self-reflection or criticism. This results in the demonization of queer people and allies who go on to leave the church. David Gushee diagnoses the damage done to communities of faith:

Christians have alienated gays and lesbians and their families, friends, and sympathetic allies, driving many away from the love of Jesus Christ and contributing to the secularization of American culture. They have done a great deal to create hostility to the church and closed ears to the Gospel. The saddest cases are the church’s own rejected gay and lesbian adolescents and twentysomethings. They are legion.<sup>287</sup>

The Covenant Church has instantiated a kind of tyranny of the majority. This is evidenced by non-democratic tactics such as out of order proceedings in the ministerium,

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<sup>286</sup> Reggie Williams, “White supremacy is a script we’re given at birth,” *The Cristian Century*, September 23, 2020. Emphasis mine. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/white-supremacy-script-we-re-given-birth>

<sup>287</sup> David Gushee, “Christians v. Gays: The Damage Done,” *Religion Dispatches*, June 27, 2013. <https://religiondispatches.org/2013/06/27/christians-v-gays-damage-done>

aberrant commissioning and writing of position papers and expository essays to arrive at a predetermined conclusion, systematic nullification of open discussion or even the possibility of presenting a counterpoint. The consequences have been the redefinition of faithful dissent, church trials and defrocking, entire congregations disfellowshipped, de facto confessional boundaries for pastors, and ultimately the treatment of self-actualized gay people as cannon fodder for an ecclesiological debate turned line in the sand. The Covenant Church has allowed conservative neo-fundamentalist elements in its ranks to violate its very ethos and to redefine Covenant identity and its testimony to the broader Christian Church.

David Nyvall called our non-confessional identity our “password and ransom. Losing it would cause the Covenant to forfeit its right to exist any longer as a Christian denomination, merely sinking to the degrading position of a sect.” C. V. Bowman said that our forebears “hold that the local church shall consist of only believing members but at the same time have room for all true believers, no matter what their viewpoints are on controversial doctrines. It is this principle which really distinguishes Mission Friends from other Christian denominations.”<sup>288</sup> Truthfully, I ask, at the denominational level, *what now distinguishes being Covenant?*

Whether you think I have the explanation of the current state of the church nailed down or you think that I’m way off base, it is undeniable that the ECC has been on a trajectory of excommunication of faithfully dissenting members. Each one of us needs to decide if we want to continue down that path or earnestly seek an off ramp.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is being called to abandon its culture of heterosexism, of supremacy, and of contempt. Doing so will require lowering defenses, intentional listening, responsive reconciliation, and willingness to be disquieted. We must stop hunting for heretics. We must get out of our echo chambers and talk to one another. Covenant leaders must proactively create spaces for healing. This cannot be done by the Annual Meeting in which people place votes about things that don't affect them and then go on with their lives. We require a more integrative approach.

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<sup>288</sup> Both quotes are found in Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 2-3.

## **The Covenant, The Bible, and “Discernment”**

The Evangelical Covenant Church has a problem: the contrast between what the Bible *is* and what we might *wish that it was*. The denomination’s “discerned position on human sexuality” is based almost exclusively on a particular reading and interpretation of a handful of biblical texts. Texts that were not written for and are not fully capable of answering the questions we are asking of them: “Does God bless gay romance? Are ‘male’ and ‘female’ normative or exclusive in God’s created order? For whom is the benediction of marriage offered?” The Bible presents diverse and sometimes contradictory statements about many topics and it does not present a single unified doctrine or ethic about either sexuality or marriage. This doesn’t mean that we can’t draw throughlines from it, but appealing to the text to arrive at scientific conclusions about complex topics that weave together culture, psychology, biology, ethics, morality, and theology *requires* that we prioritize certain texts and certain translations and interpretations of those texts, and subordinate others. *Every* reader does this, be they conservative or progressive, traditionalist or revisionist, fundamentalist or radical. Affirming readings of the Bible are just as “biblical” and just as “reasoned” and “reasonable” as non-affirming readings.

What all Christians are professing is that the Bible has the power to transform lives. That is at once a liberating and dreadful proposition, because the transformative power of the Bible means that *it might lead us out of our own view*.

I would argue that the Covenant Church, in fact, *does not have a discerned position on human sexuality*. Discernment is a process that requires honestly admitting our limitations and seeking the wisdom of others. Discernment requires that we acknowledge our own preconceptions and biases. It means setting aside our own wants and ideas and listening to outside voices. It means entertaining new insights and different perspectives. It means having the freedom to change your mind and the safety of sharing that with the community.

When has the process of discernment about human sexuality and marriage in our fellowship ever looked anything like that? When has Covenant leadership acknowledged even the possibility of the legitimacy of alternative viewpoints? When have we commissioned task forces to gather data, to study, to present findings, and make

recommendations (even a minority opinion)? When have we intentionally platformed speakers to share scholarship and stories that point to surprising new perspectives? When has the Covenant Church, as an institution, ever done anything but to suppress ministers and lay leaders who offered to do this on their own, when safety and goodwill were revoked? I've spoken with writers of the 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality, and I regard them highly. I believe that they were honestly writing what they thought was the most accurate reflection of traditional Christian sexual ethics at the time and that they approached their commission to crafting the resolution with fidelity. I also believe that clinging tightly to that one, brief, constrained document for the next thirty years without any serious attempt to reevaluate it—when 35% of the Annual Meeting wanted to pursue thoughtful study—and then calling it a “discerned position” is a gross overstatement.

It would be wrong to think that the Covenant Church, as a diverse collection of individuals, has come to anything resembling a settled position on sexuality. Settling on a single position is not really something the Church typically does. The historic Christian tradition reveals numerous examples of correcting either harmful, ill-reasoned, or inconvenient theologies and ethical practices. Slavery, segregation, prohibition of interracial marriage: those were all Christian positions, at least in certain communities, until they weren't. So was antisemitism. Collecting interest on loans was as anti-Christian as you could be until John Calvin said it was all good. Does your church play drums during worship? Do you sing *in English*? How long have those positions been settled? Tell me, what is the discerned Christian position on glossolalia?

The Covenant Church does not have a discerned position on many topics: the virgin birth, atonement, Trinity, Heaven and Hell. These represent core Christian doctrines—they have also been contested and debated over the centuries—and yet they are not found anywhere in our affirmations or resolutions. Sexuality is. Not a discerned position, but a boundary. One voted into binding policy by the Annual Meeting, to be sure, but only after a singular viewpoint was elevated to the delegitimization of all others. This process of making sexuality the boundary highlights our profound disunity, as zealous members, including many who were entrusted to positions of leadership, felt the need to solidify a position for which there was serious faithful dissent.

Calling it a discerned position is not only inaccurate, but also presumptuous. The Covenant Church does not deny access for gay people to get married. *It outsources it.* A gay couple in a Covenant church can go get married somewhere else and then be back in worship the next Sunday. The “discerned position” would not affect them, except to cause unnecessary friction with their pastor when they’re told, “You can get married, but I just can’t have anything to do with it.” The “discerned position” merely functions as a reminder to sexual and gender minorities that their inclusion in our faith communities will always be questioned and conditional. Failure to recognize this reality betrays either ignorance or cynicism

The narrative of the “discerned position” sends a message of finality. In two words it tells a familiar story of group identity and coherence. “This is the way.” “So say we all.” “The tribe has spoken.” A phrase to end the conversation, not to open it up to curiosity.

But humans are naturally curious creatures. Certain members of the tribe may have seen the Bible as their hidden advantage and that appeals to plain-text biblicism would be sufficient to quell any dissent. They may not have anticipated the volume and depth of scholarship that has been released in the last thirty years that actually leverages the Bible and the Gospel for affirming viewpoints. They may also not have anticipated that a growing number of Christians would be exposed to and convinced of those viewpoints, including other scholars, pastors, and leaders.

People across the Covenant Church are changing their minds. Some are now loud and proud allies. Some are convinced of an expansive view of sexuality, but aren’t sure what to do with it, or what it might cost them to admit that publicly. Others are right now having their hearts and minds pushed towards ideas that they don’t have permission to have, and they are scared. This process is constantly unfolding because people are curious and keep learning and keep encountering the “other”. Many of the pastors who have been forced out, or who are currently under the gun, changed their minds *after* their ordination.

The Covenant is long overdue for a true period of discernment. This conversation, in which individuals are afforded true safety and are open to the possibility of being changed through the process, should have already happened. It will be painful and costly to do it now. It will be *more* painful and *more* costly to wait and do it in the future. Either

way, a reckoning for the denomination's tardiness on this matter will be necessary. What the Church needs now is integration and healing. Sibling authors Billie and Paul Hoard put it well:

So the simple message of "get over it" or to "just accept" what's happened misses the entire point and is dismissive at best and abusive at worst. Working through is a process, not a moment or choice. It takes time, repetition, commitment, and continued faith in an audacious hope.<sup>289</sup>

We are a "people of the Book" because God speaks to his people through our sacred texts. Being honest about the Bible does not preclude this, but it does require that we engage in a continuous and recurrent pattern of gathering, reading, prayer, and discernment. God has a history of speaking to his people in surprising, even scandalizing ways. We have created language to try to capture this scandal: *revelation, apocalypse, the prophetic spirit*. How can we acknowledge even the possibility of a prophetic movement when our own pastors are institutionally prohibited from participating in it? The Covenant has warned about this potential pitfall for decades:

If we were to restrict our freedom by clearly defined creedal statements and detailed regulations on church order to guide us, this would be a comparatively simple matter. However, if we are to continue to refuse to be bound by such human-made restrictions on Christian freedom, we must be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit as he seeks to lead us to act according to the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible.<sup>290</sup>

No one ever spoke a prophetic word without personal cost. Risking that cost is necessary if it means getting out of God's way and allowing the Spirit to work in people's lives. Peter was told in a dream, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."<sup>291</sup> He was later reminded that this view contradicted scripture. It was unbiblical. His response: "Who was I that I could hinder God?"<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Hoard and Hoard, *Eucontamination*, 48.

<sup>290</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 30.

<sup>291</sup> Acts 10:15, NRSVue

<sup>292</sup> Acts 11:17, NRSVue

## **Recommendations for the Evangelical Covenant Church**

Our beloved church is mired in self-contradiction, suspicion, and distortion and we require proactive measures to move forward in a healthy way. Our conflicting narratives about biblical authority and freedom in Christ require clarification. Earlier attempts to solidify this ethos should either be affirmed, *in action as well as speech*, or should be decisively modified. It is not fair to our membership to speak about freedom in one way and, in practice, to behave antithetically to that conviction. Because we are a diverse body, these kinds of decisions will require discussion that goes well beyond a thirty-minute window allocated at the Annual Meeting. Covenanters need to be given the space and guaranteed the safety to ask questions and to hear genuine responses, opinions, and criticisms. The following is a modest list of recommendations for how the denomination might *begin* to do that work. They are informed by close listening to voices from throughout the Covenant who long for similar things.

### **Recommendation #1: Lean into theological diversity.**

I want to begin with a change in posture that every person reading this report can begin to do right now. Acknowledge the fact that not a single one of us knows everything that can be known about God and the intersection of our finite human lives with the divine. We all have limited access to knowledge, we make mistakes, and we are all in a process of transformation. Our mutual confession as Christians is to devote ourselves to the worship of God as divine love most clearly revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. We are not called to worship the Bible, or certainty, or cultural supremacy. Theologian Walter Wink gives us some wisdom on this matter:

We need to take a few steps back and be honest with ourselves. I am deeply convinced of the rightness of what I have said... But I must acknowledge that it is not an airtight case... Rather than tearing at each other's throats, therefore, we should humbly admit our limitations. How do I know I am correctly interpreting God's word for us today? How do you? Wouldn't it be wiser for Christians to lower the volume by 95% and quietly present our beliefs, knowing full well that we might be wrong?<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in Wink et al., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*, 48. See note 250 on page 152.

This can begin by encouraging a broader discussion of Christian ethics that goes beyond “what the Bible says.” The belief that the Bible is an obvious and unambiguous source of certain kinds of knowledge is what Dale Martin refers to as “the sin of Christian textual foundationalism.” He writes,

I have insisted that the texts don't speak—except in the most tenuous of metaphorical senses of that term—and that we as humans have to do lots of hard work to interpret the texts before they have any meaning for us at all...

My point is that when we do so, we have to recognize that it is not the text itself that is simply "giving" us that meaning. The "finding" of meaning in Scripture necessitates interpretation and cannot be done outside interpretation. Human beings are necessary for meaning to take place, and we can experience no interpretation without human agency...

One regularly comes across a certain tone in debates about Christian ethics, a tone by which one or both parties in the debate seem to say, "Don't blame me! I'm not opposed to gay people... The Bible is. The Bible tells us...." Such people never admit that the Bible doesn't actually talk. They do not acknowledge their own interpretive practices by which they have arrived at what they think the Bible "says." People throughout history, therefore, have committed grave ethical offenses—supporting slavery, oppressing women, fighting unjust wars, killing, torturing, and harming their fellow human beings under cover of "the Bible says."<sup>294</sup>

North Park Director of Contextual and Lifelong Learning Bret Widman has recently shared a powerful tool for sharing across division in his essay on interpretive communities. Recognizing that faith communities may sometimes lack “a paradigm of listening and discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to a specific congregation,” he employs a *Stop, Look, and Listen* model of discernment:

Cultivating an interpretive community requires the slow process of stopping whenever a decision is needing to be made, looking to the past, and listening to how the community perceives their past and present... If one does not stop, look, and listen, the consequences may be dire with even the best of intentions... The paradigm of an interpretive community

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<sup>294</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 1-2. See note 112 on page 41.

is one where there is a desire, longing, and intentionality of seeing and hearing what Jesus is presently saying and presently doing.<sup>295</sup>

The model that Widman presents emphasizes looking to our histories and beginning an interpretive process to discern where God might be leading us in our particular context. This may be precisely the type of community building that we need to animate a revived period of discernment within and across our fellowships.

**Recommendation #2: The Covenant actively commissions a study group and publishes a work of biblical and theological inquiry that contrasts with the position of the 1996 resolution and is informed by contemporary scholarship and the experience of LGBTQ+ Christians.**

It is well past time to acknowledge the diversity in our denomination and to not merely cease actively punishing and suppressing these voices, but to elevate them and learn from them. A study does not require approval from the Annual Meeting; this could be done *today* by the Covenant Executive Board and Covenant Offices Leadership Team. Even though the delegitimization machine has driven many qualified and capable leaders, scholars, and queer siblings in Christ out of our fellowship, there remains a determined remnant who would be willing and excited to participate in this project. Inviting them in good faith will require a penitent posture and assurances of safety and, more than likely, third-party mediation. I personally would gladly avail myself of my time and service to assist in the organization of such a committee.

Scott Erickson, a school administrator and North Park Seminary alum, had an acute recognition of the critical need for this work *twenty years ago*:

Can the church think together about important theological issues from different viewpoints?... In early Covenant history, there was a general understanding of conversion as the “one thing needful” without constructing doctrinal litmus tests as the way one would belong to the Covenant Church...

[The] lack of diverse material seems quite troubling, not because of the content of [the denomination’s] texts but rather because none have produced a thoughtful analysis of

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<sup>295</sup> Bret M. Widman, “Cultivating an Interpretive Community for the Present and the Future” *Covenant Quarterly*, 83, no. 2 (2025): 53-54, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/263/225>

differing viewpoints, a thoroughgoing dialogue on important theological matters related to sexuality, or a public listening process that includes the voices of homosexual persons...

Christians and Covenanters, working biblically and theologically, are developing broader definitions of sexuality. Indeed, many Christians who read the Bible carefully and take it seriously have found a theologically more expansive view of Christian teaching on sexuality than previously considered, just as the Covenant Church applied this kind of approach to expanding its own theologically and biblically based understandings about baptism and the ordination of women, for example. As with these issues, some would now dispute any teaching that would consider heterosexuality as the only normative sexuality for Christians. Is it not of concern that some might come to view the 1996 resolution, and its reaffirmation in the 2004 referral, as the only theologically viable position for a person in the Covenant Church? Is it not time for the Covenant Church to consider how a theologically and biblically sound dialogue on homosexuality might be initiated and sustained so that the diversity of voices might be heard?...

I wonder how the denomination has helped its churches and families with the task of pastoral care when it has offered so few and such non-diverse resources on the topic of human sexuality... From a pastoral perspective, the Covenant Church's resolution-oriented solution to the issue of human sexuality seems unhelpful because it moves too quickly to unequivocal language and, thereby, neglects important principles in the Covenant's history of biblical theology...

It would seem imperative not to isolate the Bible from the principles of theological process. But when the Bible does become isolated, people might articulate their views on sexuality based on traditional cultural assumptions and then find Bible verses to support those views... The language of resolution does not allow for an acknowledgement of ambiguity and a disagreement among biblical scholars on the issue of homosexuality... The denomination has thus neglected the task of helping people develop the biblical and theological tools to think carefully about this complex issue.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Erickson, "Let Us Take Our Bible Seriously," 109-112. See note 45 on page 22.

**Recommendation #3: The ECC invites churches who have gone through their own process of discernment in developing inclusivity statements to share their stories.**

Instead of pushing congregations with inclusion statements to leave the denomination, as has been the wont of conference and denominational leadership for years, the ECC could instead conduct interviews in which leaders and congregants from those churches explain the process and reasoning by which those statements of inclusion came about. These interviews could then be published to social media, to the Covenant website, and in the Covenant Companion, to bring these discussions out of closed-door meetings and private email threads, and into the light of day. This will no doubt inspire its fair share of criticism and no small amount of pearl clutching, but this small simple act would be a powerful statement of communal fellowship, discernment, and solidarity. It would also make good on a commission given to us by our Covenant forebears:

If, however, we concentrate in our outreach on one segment of society because of either of these fears or simply because of our attraction to those who are like us, [p. 16] we deny the principle of freedom in Christ because we do not permit persons in our fellowship the freedom to be different from us. The effect of such concentration is to make it even more difficult to communicate with the world around us. We need the voice of a wide variety of peoples on the floor of our conferences and in our policy making bodies. We need the corrective discipline of their differing backgrounds to keep our message and our work relevant to our generation.<sup>297</sup>

**Recommendation #4: Covenant leadership reaffirms the denomination's commitment to its foundational ethos and reforms its punitive model OR admits an ecclesiological shift and takes steps to craft an orienting confessional statement.**

This, of course, would require Annual Meeting action. The ECC finds itself under the pressure of substantial internal and external criticism for saying one thing and doing another. We purport a non-confessional approach to ecclesiology in which diversity, both in culture and in thought, is celebrated, and in which freedom is explicitly affirmed. Recent actions tell a different story. The moment we voted out a congregation over a narrow interpretive heuristic, the church crossed a line into confessionalism. Elements of

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<sup>297</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 32.

diversity in our community are not only not celebrated, but framed exclusively as moral failing, a problem to be solved, a weakness to be overcome. Our freedom in Christ is conditional, and those who hold the most power set the conditions.

Adopting a confessional statement or additional affirmations as a barrier for membership will feel to many like a historic betrayal of what makes the Covenant special, but it may be more in line with where the denomination has moved following Evangelical church growth. Bringing the denomination's public-facing ideology and its policies and procedures into closer alignment provides clarity for all churches, pastors, and congregants on both sides of the aisle. If they haven't already, Covenanters should start deciding if they would like to make overtures in favor of one position over the other.

**Recommendation #5: Give serious attention to a congregational approach to marriage.**

Should we as a denomination unify around our identity as a pietistic, non-confessional, doctrinally and theologically diverse fellowship, then efforts to reorient around that shared ecclesiology demand a clear-eyed return to congregational autonomy. A congregational approach to marriage allows for the freedom to have important conversations about marriage, ethics, and ministry with LGBTQ persons, with decisions being determined less out of fear and more out of community discernment. A move to this model would require Annual Meeting confirmation, and so any attempt to make that shift would necessitate creating space for Covenanters to communicate their congregation's needs, to present their cases, and to debate the relative merits and challenges. This would have to happen *before* any motion put before the Annual Meeting, perhaps over the course of multiple years. Some churches may want to leave a denomination in which other congregations permit same-gender weddings, even if they are not required to adopt that policy. In fact, some congregations have already inscribed into their constitutions and bylaws that any step towards even the possibility of a more open, congregational approach would automatically trigger a voluntary removal process. It's unfortunate that there are members who are so staunch in their opposition to same-sex romantic relationships that they are not willing even to consider the conversation or test its outcomes, but in choosing to leave, they would be leaving a denomination that is more aligned to the historic ethos of the Covenant Church.

## Final Thoughts

Movement on these recommendations will require active campaigning from those who hold power and influence in the Covenant. They won't just *happen*. If the current leadership team is uninterested in pursuing them, then a groundswell of motivated and courageous stakeholders could organize to impress the importance of the issue or to begin to advance the goals of the recommendations outside of the normal structures. In any case, those with a minority position cannot "force" a debate. Those in power will have to consciously concede power and in some way uplift the minority. Covenanters from the past have spoken directly to this:

Such freedom in our personal relationships will also lead to a consideration for the contribution of minorities. 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.<sup>298</sup>

This has always been the paradox. Prophetic movements *always* come from the margins, and marginal voices always threaten both the power and influence of the institution. But a movement cannot be discerned to be prophetic if the powerful do not concede their power to the marginalized; or until the institution itself comes to a calamitous end.

In all honesty, my experience tells me that the latter is more likely to occur than the former. The power/prophesy dichotomy is a positive feedback loop. Those who hold power believe that their privilege is evidence of their rightness. The prophetic critique challenges this paradigm. It must be wrong, so it is suppressed. This increases the need for the prophetic voice. And on it goes until something cracks; maybe the need for the security of certainty, maybe the community itself. I continue to have hope that I'm wrong, and as evidence I submit to you this report, which took considerable time, research, and

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<sup>298</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 29.

emotional energy to complete. I would not have done all of this if I didn't think that we are still capable of true discernment and reconciliation.

The prophetic word that came to our fellowship in 1963 still speaks to us today:

The carelessness that would distort the gospel out of concern for success or growth; the excessive concern for the comforts of life in a world of misery and need; the failure to live as persons accountable to God for all expenditures of money, talent, and time; the factionalism and exclusivism by which the members of Christ's body are separated from one another; the sinful pride and prejudice which prevents loving of persons of other races, religions, and classes; the failure to understand appreciatively those in the Christian fellowship with whom we disagree; the unwillingness to extend to individualists and non-conformists the freedom required for creative spiritual growth; and the joylessness sometimes attendant upon the Christian community in its excessive concern for self and its neglect of the grace and power available in Christ—all these the Bible condemns and in judgment calls the Christian to repentance and renewal.<sup>299</sup>

If you do not know how this applies to the queer people in our orbits, then I'm afraid you have not been listening to them. There is still time. We can still lean in close. *It will not be easy.* It requires vulnerability. It requires a recognition of past mistakes and the strength of will to both admit and correct them. Nils Lund saw clearly the consequences of not mustering up this strength:

If we move on in this way, we will land where the so-called orthodoxism within Lutheranism landed, namely, in a sterile, bone-hard, and spiritless orthodoxy. The emphasis on doctrine above the spiritual life will be one of the earliest results. The hunt for heretics will begin again. The Bible will be used as ammunition in theological conflicts but not as food for the spiritual life.<sup>300</sup>

Many voices in our fellowship are telling us that we are already there. *Do not sneer at their testimony. Do not shrug and ignore what they are saying.* That is not discernment, it's a defense mechanism.

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<sup>299</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 21-22.

<sup>300</sup> Nils W. Lund, "The Authority of Holy Scriptures," *Covenant Quarterly*, 30, no. 4 (1972), 22.

The LGBTQ+ people in our fellowship are not mistakes. They are not artifacts of a fallen world. They are not case studies to be leveraged in arguing either the depravity of the modern culture or Christian supremacy over it. They are beloved children of God, made uniquely in God's image, and bear a critical witness to the rest of us of His/Her/Their divine diversity and expansive mercy.

To become what one is meant to be, to realize the very purpose for which one is created, that is freedom.<sup>301</sup>

May we all have the determination and courage to discover that purpose and let it be guided by our divine capacity to love and be loved.

In Fellowship...

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<sup>301</sup> *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 23.