

2nd Opinion: Premature predictions of evangelical concessions on LGBT

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Pardon the yawn.

The 1.8 million-member Presbyterian Church (USA) [recently voted](#) to approve same-sex marriage, an announcement that shouldn't surprise anyone who has followed the mainline Protestant denomination's trajectory. Perhaps a more substantial but less widely reported story was the decision by City Church, San Francisco's largest evangelical congregation, to affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender couples.



Jonathan Merritt Evangelicals are among the most stalwart opponents to LGBT marriage, but a number of evangelical congregations have shifted their stance in the last year. Among them are Seattle's Eastlake Community Church, Nashville's GracePointe Church, Portland's Christ Church and New Heart Community Church in La Mirada, Calif. Other prominent evangelical pastors tell me off the record they are in the midst of similar conversations.

Churches aren't the only evangelical factions inching left on matters of

sexuality. Popular Christian musicians and worship leaders have either [come out of the closet or publicly voiced support](#) of LGBT equality. And evangelical publishers have released a glut of [books taking progressive positions](#) on sexuality and marriage. These stories are part of an ongoing media narrative about shifting evangelical attitudes on LGBT issues.

Support for LGBT concerns has increased among nearly every subset of Christians, and a look at data from organizations such as the [Pew Research Center](#) and [Public Religion Research Institute](#) shows evangelicals indeed are shifting. If the Supreme Court [legalizes same-sex marriage](#) nationwide as early as this year, shifts in public opinion could quicken.

Opponents are a ‘small and aging subset’

The data show opposition to same-sex marriage is coming mainly from a small and aging subset of the Christian world. If you follow the headlines, it feels like an invisible finger has flicked the first domino in a long row of tiles.

But don’t be fooled. Evangelicals still are mostly opposed to same-sex marriage and concerned about how gay rights might infringe on religious freedom. A lot of time remains on the game clock, and much of the field is yet to be negotiated.

The Barna Group, for example, reports evangelicals have “become more resistant toward LGBT concerns on several fronts.” But Barna uses a narrow nine-point definition of evangelical not embraced by any other major polling organization.

Many conservative Christian leaders and political organizations tell me they consider same-sex marriage to be [a fait accompli](#), and most seem to have shifted their attention away from legally banning gay marriage and now focus on churches, nonprofits and businesses.

The Southern Baptist Convention cut ties with New Heart Community Church after its pastor endorsed homosexuality, and the Evangelical Covenant Church withdrew its support of Christ Church after its pastor made similar statements. After World Vision announced it would hire people in LGBT marriages, the swift public outcry forced the organization to renege. And conservative Christian organizations are pouring money and energy into religious liberty battles to protect Christian florists, cake bakers and photographers from having to serve LGBT couples.

‘Jury still out’

The jury is still out on each of these matters, and compromises may arise. Consider, for example, how evangelicals evolved on divorce during the past three decades. As the general public became more accepting of divorce, many conservative Christians followed suit. But others found ways to be more inclusive of divorced Christians in their congregations and communities without moral affirmation of divorce itself. It seems quite possible a similar path may be carved on sexuality.

To hear some commentators talk, debates on these matters are over and conservatives have lost. But such predictions are premature. Some evangelicals have indeed shifted on LGBT issues, but it’s no avalanche—at least not yet.

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