



Losing our Religion: Conservative churches grapple with gender issues in time of growth

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Religious conservative leaders at the national level see the fight over gender issues as make-or-break. (Associated Press/File) [more >](#)

US. church attendance is dropping, but [Hope Church in Memphis](#), Tennessee, is packing the pews — or, in Hope’s case, modern theater seats with individual cup holders.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church affiliate, one of the fastest-growing in the nation, holds four services each weekend to accommodate the nearly 7,000 parishioners who come for the multiethnic community, the coffee kiosks, the mix of contemporary and traditional music, the outreach to non-churchgoers, and the biblically based message.

Hope’s conservative stance on human sexuality — faithfulness in marriage, chastity in singleness, and marriage between one man and one woman — has done little, if anything, to rein in the church’s galloping growth.

“I think what people appreciate, honestly, is do you believe what you say you believe?” said Hope senior pastor [Rufus Smith](#). “If you’re going to be an [LGBTQ] affirming church, be that, and if you’re not, be that, so people will appreciate whatever your position of conscience is. And I think that is what has helped [evangelical] churches not experience a decline because of that particular issue.”

Four years after the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, conservative churches, led by the evangelicals and nondenominationalists, still draw enthusiastic crowds each weekend to their megachurches, even as liberal mainline Protestant denominations wilt.

“For evangelicals, being conservative is what has held them to that same level as a share of the population,” said Ryan P. Burge, an assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University who tracks the data.

Yet the future is uncertain as attendance plateaus. Evangelicals made up 22.5% of the U.S. population in 2018, and that share is expected to inch up to only 22.6% by 2030, according to Mr. Burge's numbers, which are based on the General Social Survey, a trove of sociological data.

A 2016 study led by Wilfrid Laurier University professor David Millard Haskell found that the "recipe for church growth" was conservative theology coupled with worship music featuring drums and guitars, but he said he thinks the growth has hit a wall since then.

He also said cultural upheaval of gender issues and the battles it entails — such as same-sex wedding cakes, public accommodations and transgender athletes — is taking a toll.

"What's going on in the culture with the greater acceptance of gay marriage will make it harder for churches promoting traditional views," Mr. Haskell said.

But he added: "If a church stuck with their traditional views and were able to articulate it in a way that met the hearts and minds, the best research shows that keeping to those traditional values will cause your church to grow."

Religious conservative leaders at the national level see the fight over gender issues as make-or-break.

"The current cultural attack is indeed about our right to live according to our faith and even about what it means to be a man or a woman," said Mario Diaz, general counsel of Concerned Women for America. "That is why we are engaged there most prominently. When males are entering women's private spaces and demanding to compete against them in sports, we must speak up."

'Culture war is dead'

Blaming same-sex marriage for the decline of Christian churchgoers in America would be too simplistic, religious scholars say, given that

the slide can be traced to the turn of the century – the 19th century – and picked up steam during the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Mainline denominations that flowed with societal changes, such as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the United Church of Christ “have all seen dramatic declines in their membership and attendance as they liberalize their teachings on human sexuality,” said Keith Boyette, president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

He said the same is true with the United Methodist Church, a mainline denomination grappling with a schism over same-sex marriage that is expected to play out at the general conference in May.

“In my opinion, as the church has become more reflective of culture, it has declined,” Mr. Boyette said. “Because why do you need to go to church if it says the same thing you hear on the street every day?”

Mr. Haskell said the mainline Protestant churches are in a “death spiral.”

But the United Church of Christ’s Michael Schuenemeyer said the church’s embrace of LGBTQ rights in many ways has energized the denomination.

He said UCC churches that are affirming of LGBTQ – not all congregations are – have been “about 23-24% larger than the congregations that are not open and affirming.”

“It has really been something that’s been a mark of vitality in the life of the church,” said Mr. Schuenemeyer, who heads the church’s LGBTQ Ministries. “Across the board, we’ve seen a decline in membership, but those that are declining that are open and affirming are declining at a slower pace than those that are not open and affirming.”

Oddly enough, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* may have helped evangelical churches, much as it arguably aided

Republicans, by largely taking same-sex marriage off the table as an issue.

From 2006 to 2012, churchgoers “were shifting their worship attendance consistently” as conservatives and liberals switched churches at roughly the same rate, said Paul A. Djupe, a political science professor at Denison University.

“However, after Obergefell, same-sex marriage has been far less of a contested issue in public dialogue (the UMC vote is one exception), which means it should be less of a catalyst for people leaving or joining congregations,” Mr. Djupe said in an email.

As a result, “I always say that that part of the culture war is dead. Abortion has taken center stage,” Mr. Burge said.

“The nondenominational churches, the ones that are growing, the megachurches, and even Southern Baptist churches have basically abandoned the issue, knowing that whatever they say is not going to bring more people in,” he added.

‘You’re wanted and needed’

The days of denouncing same-sex marriage from the pulpit, as the Rev. Jerry Falwell did, are effectively over. Many conservative churches have moved away from hot-button political issues, said Peter Sprigg, a senior fellow at the conservative Family Research Council.

“There’s always been a stereotype by the left that somehow at evangelical churches, the pastors are getting up in the pulpit every Sunday and railing against gays and abortion and so forth, and I just don’t think it happens,” Mr. Sprigg said. “I think they would be surprised at how little attention these issues get – and maybe they need more, because the people in the congregations need to be educated to counter the messages that they’re getting from the culture.”

Clergy are increasingly cut from the cloth of pastors like Mr. [Smith](#) at [Hope Church](#), who has reached out to gay parishioners.

He meets with them and lets them know that they are “not only welcome, but wanted and needed.” He refers same-sex couples who want to get married to local LGBTQ-affirming churches.

Still, they feel tension.

“We’ve conducted meetings with our people who are same-sex and even those who are same-sex-attracted but are celibate,” Mr. [Smith](#) said. “And to be fair, they say, ‘We appreciate your saying we’re welcome and wanted, but at the same time, we don’t really have all of the rights and privileges of everyone else.’”

They are right, he said. “I tell them, ‘We’re grappling with that. Your statement is true. However, we want you to help us as we grapple with this issue.’”

He also has asked gay worshippers why they attend Hope and not an LGBTQ-affirming church. One reason: His church is more vibrant.

“They say, ‘We don’t want to be that isolated,’” he said. ““We like the Gospel, the environment, the way it’s preached and taught here, the relationships we have. And we don’t want to be in a church where it’s just one class of people.’”

