

# Burbank Leader

## In Theory: The church and gay lifestyles

October 28, 2010

*A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute asked 1,017 Americans their view on religion and homosexuality, between Oct. 14 and 17, in the wake of a highly publicized rash of suicides by gay people. The poll revealed that most Americans believe churches contribute to gay suicides. Churches, the poll said, communicate "a lot" of negative perceptions of gay and lesbian people. Do you agree with the poll's conclusions? And what grade would you give your church in its handling of the "issue of homosexuality"? Could your church or the church overall be doing a better job at handling the "issue of homosexuality"?*

Answer:

I don't know whether the poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute about the connection between negative attitudes in some Christian churches and the recent spate of suicides by gay and lesbian people is accurate or not. And while I have talked with a number of gay and lesbian people who felt deeply wounded by the condemnations they received from some Christian ministers and congregants, it is not my intention to throw stones at those from other religions. I can only speak from the perspective of my own tradition, Unitarian Universalism.

As a straight Unitarian Universalism minister, I am proud to say that we were one of the first religious denominations to pass resolutions at the national level in support of equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. And we were one of the first denominations to ordain openly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender clergy. Most recently, we have actively supported the rights of same-sex couples to marry and adopt children.

In addition, a large percentage of our congregations have been officially certified by the Unitarian Universalist Association as "Welcoming Congregations" because of their education programs, use of inclusive language and support of those of all sexual orientations and gender expressions. For those reasons we have become known as those who "Stand on the Side of Love."

But these stances have not simply come from a commitment to social justice, as important as that may be. They are deeply rooted in our religious belief that each person has worth and dignity that is inherent and cannot be taken away by the negative opinions of others. I don't expect that I will change the minds and hearts of those whose beliefs about homosexuality are intractably imbedded in their religious dogmas. However, I hope that we can each learn to treat all people with the respect and dignity they deserve. It could just make a huge difference in suicide statistics and the quality of our lives.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford  
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,  
La Crescenta

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Polling is a tricky science in which results are often dependent upon how a question is asked and what population is being surveyed. Therefore, I would not jump to any quick conclusions based on this or any other poll.

Nevertheless, if there is a perception out there that houses of worship are influencing people negatively toward homosexuals, then that must be corrected, especially if there is a chance that this harmful atmosphere might lead to violence toward, or the suicide of, a gay individual. It is incumbent upon all religious organizations to make it perfectly clear that they do not tolerate discrimination of any kind. Period!

This does not mean that a house of worship has to compromise its theological views or moral values. It is accepted in most religious circles that a homosexual way of life is not compatible with the Bible and its teachings — yet this very same Bible commands each of us to love our neighbors as ourselves. There are no asterisks after that passage, or footnotes to the verse stating any exceptions; you can disagree with a person's lifestyle, but you may never demonize or denigrate him or her.

Fundamental respect of another human being — who according to scripture is created in the very image of God — is mandatory regardless of circumstances.

Houses of worship must be very careful never to propagate animosity, and should always strive to remain open and welcoming of all people. Bigotry or prejudice of any kind is contrary to biblical teachings, and there should be no room for it in a spiritual environment. The recently publicized news reports of bullying and suicides in the gay community are very distressing to all people of good conscience, and clergy from all faiths should step forward to denounce acts of violence and hatred.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center,

Glendale

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Could the church do a better job of how it deals with the issue of homosexuality? Absolutely.

What grade would I give my church on the gay issue? Maybe a B-plus.

My denomination, the United Church of Christ, has some churches that are called "Open and Affirming" churches which are "officially" open and welcoming to gay people. Right now my church has been described as a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" congregation by one of our members. Some of our members have openly gay children, and neither those members nor their offspring are shunned by other church members.

Like the rest of America, my congregation is torn about what to think or believe about gay people. But we are sensitive and compassionate, and I believe most of my congregation believes that gay people can't help being gay; they were born gay or with gay leanings. They certainly did not *choose* to be gay. Think about it: If you are heterosexual, did you choose to be that way? Of course not. You were born "straight." And would anybody actually *choose* to be gay? I think not.

The problem comes, I believe, from the acceptance by some members of the Christian community of the inerrancy of a few biblical passages, which can be found in Leviticus. (I personally do not share the view that scripture is inerrant; it may be the inspired word of God, but nowhere does scripture itself claim to be inerrant.) Those passages say that homosexuality is "an abomination" to the Lord. However, there are also some passages in Leviticus that say that anybody who works on the sabbath shall be put to death! So how many convenience store employees are you going to knock off this weekend?

I have seen a bumper sticker which says it all, in my opinion: "Our faith is over 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not."

The Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church,

La Cañada Flintridge

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Years ago my father arrested a man and took him to jail where the man committed suicide. Was my dad to blame, or perhaps the system that determined the man's behavior was illegal? No. The man violated the law and couldn't bear the "negative perception." He chose his own path throughout.

I view this as parallel with today's question. While society increasingly abandons biblical morality, and even those ordained to uphold it do likewise, it becomes very easy to find a scapegoat in those that still hold out for unchanging divine law over fluctuating cultural opinion. But why commit suicide over something God's law condemns if it's neither valued nor enforced? There are plenty of other places that will affirm homosexuality, so maybe it's because deep down the homosexuals are not really "gay." Perhaps they find their unnatural lifestyles unsatisfying and just maybe their consciences prompt them to wonder if those "Christian bigots" might know something after all. What to do?

Look, churches exist to cultivate godliness. They only know how to do that by following the holy manual. None wish to be considered anti-anything in particular, but homosexuality is the sin flavor of our time, and we aren't changing our mind about it unless God changes his, which won't happen. Still, God is all about conversion. He wants homosexuals in church, to hear his word, and to work through what seems inborn to what is born-again, just like the rest of us. However, they must choose their own path.

As for statistics, taking a poll of a thousand people out of 300 million Americans is hardly definitive, especially if they were all from West Hollywood. As well, America's suicide rate is about 80 per day and most, by far, are not homosexuals. So let's get off the blame game or I may start feeling "negatively perceived." Then who will we blame for what I might do to myself? We could always blame God, but then, that would be ill-advised.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church,

Montrose

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Every act of suicide is a tragedy that grieves God's heart. Each should grieve our hearts as well. Each of these dear people was made in God's image and was deeply loved by him. The church's calling is to speak the truth in love, always offering the hope of the Gospel for all people. It is to draw all to Christ and never to drive anyone to despair. Sin is a constant problem for all of us; Jesus Christ is the complete answer for all of us.

The poll results don't surprise me, but they do sadden me. In many cases I'm sure they're based on the church's failure to love others as Christ did (though he never condoned sin), and in many cases the church has failed to properly communicate what we should have. It's a problem when our focus is mostly on the sin and not on Jesus Christ our savior. It's a problem when we don't distinguish between homosexual people and homosexual

behavior. There are only two kinds of people: saved and lost. It's a problem when a church over-stigmatizes homosexual acts. The Bible categorizes them along with adultery and fornication, which by many — both in and outside of the church, and wrongly — are considered more socially acceptable.

How I grade my church or I about our handling of this issue doesn't matter. It doesn't change others' — sometimes public and often uninformed — opinions about us. I agree with the apostle Paul: "I do not even examine myself [judicially] ... but the one who examines me is the Lord." See 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 for the full statement.

Our church's calling isn't to "handle" the isolated, over-publicized, over-politicized issue of homosexuality. It's to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ died for all of us in payment of all our sins, whatever they might be.

Acts 10:43 says: "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins"

Regardless of who you are or what you've done, God loves you. He wants you to know him. He wants you to live.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church,

Burbank

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Other than the Church of Life After Shopping (who participated in the Altadena wedding last weekend of two female ecosexuals, so would seem quite good on equality issues), I have no church to report on. I do consume massive amounts of information and have said here before that I believe hostile messages on homosexuality from some churches help create a negative, even unsafe, atmosphere for gay people.

Yet among friends and in my own family I see instances of gay couples and families being part of warm and welcoming religious communities.

Grown-ups can easily avoid unfriendly situations when choosing a church — or reject organized religion entirely. But children who are not yet secure about their own sexual identity can be led by adults, themselves unaware or misguided, into harmful church waters.

Apparently there will not even be an "issue of homosexuality" in the near future when we so-called adults have passed on. By all accounts, today's young people are mostly accepting of gayness, rejecting limits on same-sex marriage, the military's "Don't ask, Don't tell" policy and other discrimination based on sexual orientation.

If current trends go unchecked, this broad-mindedness can only grow as the generations after us realize the full horror of the mess we left them. Coping with an empire in decline — infrastructure in tatters, Third World level gaps between the ultra-rich and everyone else, our democracy hijacked by big corporate cash and even our climate fundamentally changed — will keep future citizens, religious or not, much too busy to notice who's sleeping with whom, let alone care.

Roberta Medford

Atheist,

Montrose