



May 20, 2009
www.publicreligion.org

Contact: Peter Montgomery, 202-744-0941
pmontgomery@publicreligion.org

SURVEY SHOWS MAINLINE PROTESTANT CLERGY SUPPORT BROAD RIGHTS FOR GAY AND LESBIAN AMERICANS

Survey shows support from important group of Christian leaders surpasses general public, finds among the 'Uncertain Middle' willingness to separate theology and policy stands

Mainline Protestant clergy are broadly supportive of equality for gay and lesbian Americans, according to a report released today by some of the nation's leading researchers on religion and politics. Their conclusions are based on the most in-depth study ever conducted of theological and political attitudes among Mainline clergy toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in the church and society.

"Mainline clergy are generally more supportive of equal rights for gay and lesbian Americans than the general public," said Dr. Robert P. Jones, President of Public Religion Research, which conducted the study. "Clergy in these denominations have wrestled with theological questions around sexuality and report that they've been moving toward more supportive positions on equal rights in society and full inclusion in the church."

The Clergy Voices Survey (CVS) is the only broad survey of Mainline clergy in seven years, and the most comprehensive ever in scope. Findings on broad social and political attitudes and behavior during the 2008 election cycle were released earlier this spring; the report released today analyzes the answers to more than 60 in-depth questions about attitudes toward sexuality and the role of LGBT people in the church and broader society.

Martin Marty, a leading scholar on Mainline Protestantism, said the "Uncertain Middle" identified in the survey illustrates a paradox of what he calls Ecumenical Protestantism. "Because it seeks to minister to an ever more pluralist America and internally diverse church, it concentrates on conversation more than confrontation, dialogue more than diatribe." Marty says this characteristic "represents one strength of this group of clergy who are well-suited to our current task of living justly together amidst our differences."

Mainline Protestants make up 18 percent of all Americans and nearly a quarter of all voters. The CVS surveyed senior clergy from the seven largest Mainline denominations: United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Churches USA, Presbyterian Church USA, Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The survey found significant differences across the denominations on religious and political measures.

Among the survey's findings:

On a range of policy issues, Mainline Protestant clergy are generally more supportive of LGBT rights than the general population, and mostly in line with Mainline Protestants overall. Two-thirds of Mainline clergy support hate crimes legislation (67%) and workplace protections for gay and lesbian people (66%), and a majority (55%) supports adoption rights. Same-sex marriage is the only major LGBT public policy issue that does not enjoy majority support from Mainline clergy; on this issue, one-third supports same-sex marriage and another third supports civil unions.

Support for same-sex marriage increases significantly when clergy were provided with an assurance that no church or congregation would be required to perform same-sex marriage services against its beliefs. With this religious liberty assurance, support among clergy jumped from one-third support to nearly half (46%), a movement of 13 points.

There are significant and sometimes stark differences across denominational lines. Generally speaking, clergy in the UCC and Episcopal Church are more supportive of these LGBT rights, while clergy in UMC and ABCUSA are less supportive. Clergy in the other three denominations—DOC, PCUSA, and ELCA—cluster in the middle but lean supportive on all of these issues with the exception of same-sex marriage.

A plurality of Mainline clergy constitute an Uncertain Middle, while close to one-third are strongly supportive of or opposed to LGBT rights and inclusion in the church.

- Supportive Base (29%), clergy who strongly support gay and lesbian rights and generally do not see homosexuality as a choice nor as a sin;
- Opposing Base (30%), clergy who strongly oppose gay and lesbian rights and generally see homosexuality as a choice and as a sin; and
- The Uncertain Middle (41%), clergy who are supportive of some gay and lesbian rights but are ambivalent on others.

On most policy issues the Uncertain Middle tends to be closer in opinion to the Supportive Base. Strong majorities of the Uncertain Middle support adoption rights (65%) and workplace nondiscrimination laws to protect gays and lesbians (79%). A similarly large number of the Uncertain Middle opposes a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage (71%).

A religious liberty affirmation is particularly powerful in moving clergy in the Uncertain Middle toward support for civil marriage equality. Support for same-sex marriage nearly doubles among the Uncertain Middle, from just 26% to 49%, when they are assured that the law would guarantee that no church would be forced to perform same-sex marriages against its beliefs.

Overall, close to half (45%) of Mainline Protestant clergy support the ordination of gay and lesbian people with no special requirements. A huge majority (84%) of UCC clergy supports the ordination of gay and lesbian people with no special requirements, more than 2.5 times the number of ABCUSA clergy (28%) or UMC clergy (32%). ELCA and PCUSA clergy are largely split on the issue, with 54% and 50% respectively supporting ordination.

Mainline clergy believe strongly in separation of religious institutions and the state and are willing to differentiate their religious beliefs from their public policy opinions. Fifty-five percent of Mainline clergy support a strict separation of church and state, and 68% believe that opposing homosexual practices on theological grounds does not mean that one has to oppose legal rights for gay and lesbian people.

Strong majorities of clergy in most Mainline denominations, and a slim majority overall, believe that the church should not oppose efforts to make homosexuality acceptable in society. Fifty-one percent of ministers believe that the church should not work to oppose making homosexuality acceptable, including 81% of UCC clergy, 77% of Episcopal clergy, and 61% of ELCA clergy. Among United Methodist and American Baptist ministers, less than 4-in-10 agree (39% and 31% respectively).

Mainline clergy have become significantly more progressive on gay and lesbian issues over the past decade. Between 2001 and 2008, the number of clergy agreeing that gays and lesbians should have all the same rights and privileges as other American citizens increased nine percentage points from 70% to 79%. Nearly half (45%) of Mainline clergy report that their views on gay and lesbian issues are more liberal today than they were 10 years ago. About 4-in-10 say their views have not changed. Only 14% say their views are now more conservative than they were a decade earlier.

Mainline clergy are more likely to embrace a more modernist than orthodox theological worldview. Nearly half (47%) take a modernist approach to theology, compared to one-third who have more traditional theological views. One-in-five clergy have a mix of modernist and traditionalist theological views.

“This survey adds significantly to the body of research on Mainline clergy attitudes toward sexuality,” said John Green, Director of the Bliss Institute for Applied Politics at the University of Akron, who helped oversee the data collection for the study. “It will be an invaluable resource to scholars, denominational leaders, public officials, and individuals engaged in discussions of sexuality in churches and in the public arena.”

The survey, which was conducted by mail, contained over 250 separate questions and generated 2,658 respondents with a response rate of 44%. The Mainline Protestant Clergy Voices Survey was funded by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.