

Global Christian attitudes towards transgenderism "softening," study suggests

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Sacramento Pride Parade, supporting the LGBT community, June 15 2013. The new study highlights the leadership of many Churches in the United States in shifting the balance of Christian attitudes towards trans people. Credit: Robert Couse-Baker, via Flickr

A mapping exercise examining the positions of major Christian denominations on transgender identities suggests that a growing number of Churches around the world are taking an inclusive approach towards

trans people and communities.

A growing number of Christian denominations, particularly within Protestant traditions, are softening their stance on transgenderism and embracing trans people as congregants and ministers, a new study suggests.

While the Church in general has a reputation for intransigence on questions of gender and sexuality, the research, which mapped the official positions of different denominations around the world, points to "a slow, sometimes grudging, but growing momentum for change among Christians within Protestantism especially."

The Church of England, Lutheran denominations in Scandinavia, and numerous Churches in the United States are described as leading the shift towards a state of broad-based acceptance in which trans people are able to minister, teach and marry in their affirmed gender.

At the same time, the study acknowledges that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches remain officially opposed to transgenderism. "The overwhelming majority of the 2.1 billion Christians in the world belong to Churches which are officially unsympathetic to the claims of transgender people," it observes.

The research was carried out by the Reverend Duncan Dormor, who is Dean of Chapel and Director of Studies for Theology at St John's College, University of Cambridge. He undertook the study having been asked to outline Christian attitudes towards transgenderism for a book, *The Legal Status of Transsexual and Transgender Persons*.

The mapping exercise assessed the official positions of as many major Christian denominations as possible, drawing in particular on any formal statements that these Churches had issued. These were then grouped

together by type, in order to provide a sense of which dominant viewpoints currently define Christianity as a whole.

The results suggest that many Churches have, within the last few years, become far less conservative on transgender issues than is traditionally assumed.

The study adds: "The ministry and marriage of transgender Christians has as often been grudgingly accepted as positively embraced, mostly within the last decade, and frequently in the face of significant unease of internal opposition. Nevertheless, there is growing momentum for change; for acceptance and welcoming of transgender Christians."

The challenge transgenderism poses to some Christian denominations is rooted in "theological anthropology" - in simple terms a faith-based understanding of the human condition and what the difference between the sexes means. Many conservative Christians believe that God created two distinct forms of human - male and female - and that these sexed differences are an essential characteristic of what it means to be human.

In response, during the latter half of 20th Century, various groups emerged on the fringes of mainstream Christianity that not only welcome and affirm transgender Christians, but actively campaign for their rights. These developed into pan-Christian activist groups.

The new study suggests that ideas from these groups are now percolating through to moderate, mainstream Christianity as well. In particular, Protestant Churches, which focus heavily on pastoral responsibilities in the community and emphasise toleration of difference, are becoming increasingly open-minded towards trans people.

Much of the progress has taken place in the United States, where in 1996 the Presbyterian Church of Atlanta became the first mainstream

Christian denomination to allow a religious leader, Erin (previously Eric) Svenson, to remain in post following surgery to change gender. Since then groups such as the Presbyterian Church USA (in 2010) and the Episcopal Church (in 2012) have followed suit, by welcoming the ordination of transgender clergy.

In Europe, change has come about not only from inside Christianity, but also from external legislation changes recognising transgender people, which has obliged Churches to adapt. Scandinavia, which incorporates some of the most progressive nations in the world in terms of the inclusion of LGBT people, also has some of the most inclusive [churches](#), the study says.

The research also singles out progress made within the Church of England. Even though a clear position on transgenderism has yet to be drawn up by its governing body, the General Synod, there are currently at least eight transgender priests serving within the Church, of whom six were ordained prior to transition.

Equally, while the Church secured an exemption under the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 for clergy who did not wish to solemnise the marriage of transgender people, the survey points out that it also protected the rights of transsexual parishioners to use their parish church.

Further, when the Act was debated in the House of Lords, a number of bishops from the Church of England played a vital role in preventing the progress of an amendment that would have given religious bodies greater power and autonomy to restrict the participation of [transgender](#) people in the Church.

"The developing positions of these Churches illustrates that religion's perspective on transgenderism is less monolithic than is sometimes

believed," Dormor said. "It is important to remember that it is plural and accommodates a diversity of views. It seems highly likely that the developments we have seen over the last decade or so will continue."

The report acknowledges that similar developments are unlikely to take place in the Catholic Church, which remains formally opposed to transgenderism. It does, however, suggest that unofficially the Church's attitude towards trans people may soften under Pope Francis, compared with his two predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

"Gender is one area in which Pope Francis to some extent represents intellectual continuity with the previous two Popes, but unlike them he does not see gender in exclusively ideological terms," Dormor added.

"People or communities who are marginalised or suffering are a priority for him. That means that while the Catholic Church will continue to fight the EU on gender legislation, it may simultaneously become more responsive to groups of people and individuals who need to be supported because of their marginalised status."

More information: The Legal Status of Transsexual and Transgender Persons. intersentia.com/en/shop/academ...sgender-persons.html

Provided by University of Cambridge

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