

RESPONSIVE Congregations

Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

CONGREGATIONS, LGBTQ ISSUES, AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Cumberland First Baptist Church went through a split in the early 2000s after its associate pastor, Kevin Rose, came out as gay. The church voted on whether to study the issue while keeping Rose on staff. Half of the membership voted against the motion. Most of the people who voted no soon left.

Rose stayed, even as the church split. The interim pastor at the time, Bob Sanders, steered Cumberland First Baptist through the fallout. Then, on the Sunday before 9/11, Rev. Wyatt Watkins assumed his current position as the church's lead pastor.

It was, Watkins says, "a stunning time to begin a ministry."

A decade later, in 2010, Cumberland First Baptist Church built a labyrinth in the expansive field behind its building. Modeled on the medieval labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in France, it is open to anyone for meditative walking and prayer. A few yards away stands a 12-foot-high tree trunk, the remains of an old walnut tree. There are 24 images imprinted on it—including the face of a

Boston terrier dog, two theater masks, and a rainbow. A medallion hanging from the tree is inscribed with a Bible verse, Micah 6:8, which reads: "And what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

The tree trunk, called the Journey Tree, is a memorial to Rose, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2018 after serving on the church's staff for nearly 30 years. Rose helped design and construct the labyrinth. The nearby tree trunk, with its images of things he cherished, is a way for members to remember and honor him.

The long view

In a way, the Journey Tree is also a tribute to the spirit, journey, and endurance of Cumberland First Baptist Church itself.

Founded in 1832 by a pioneer preacher who soon moved on and established the first Baptist congregation west of the Mississippi, it is one of the oldest congregations in Indianapolis. From the Civil War to the Great Depression, and on through the Vietnam War, 9/11, and Covid-19, the congregation has survived the nation's most searing traumas. About 150 people are currently affiliated with it. About half that number show up for an average Sunday morning service or watch the streamed service online.

If Cumberland First Baptist's story is a hopeful one of perseverance, it is also a case study in the powerful, enduring impact of LGBTQ issues on congregations. The church—located on the far-east side of Indianapolis—went on to thrive after Rose's coming out, but it became a much different congregation in the process.



Cumberland First Baptist Church labyrinth

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Aware that they are seen by many as bigots, some evangelical leaders are trying to figure out how to stand firm without alienating the rising share of Americans—especially younger ones—who know gay people and support gay rights, or who may themselves come out as gay.

New York Times

“What just happened?”

The dual traumas of 9/11 and the church split created fertile ground for deep conversation, introspection, and change. Watkins initiated a series of informal gatherings, called “Cumberland Conversations,” which were held in the homes of Rose and various church members. The meetings opened space for people to share their perspectives, hopes, and fears.

“People were in a position where they had to scratch their heads and ask, What just happened here?” Watkins says. “And I was fortunate enough to help them process that. And say, ‘Maybe this is what happened.’ And even more importantly: ‘What are we going to do about it?’”

Applying its experience with these conversations, the church gradually implemented a new decision-making model that emphasizes consensus building. It relies on ministry teams to gather information and make recommendations to the whole congregation. Now, the church rarely takes a vote on anything. Instead, it works through differences in “family gatherings,” building consensus before acting.

“This is a congregation that does not do drama,” Watkins says. “We’re open. That doesn’t mean there are no disagreements. But there’s no drama.”

In the late 2000s, Cumberland First Baptist also decided to build stronger ties to its community by creating the Cumberland Arts Market, an annual summer festival featuring artisans and musicians, storytelling, and history walks. “We were just a tiny church putting on this amazing event,” Watkins says of the festival, which attracted more than 2,000 people in its heyday. It has been on hiatus during the pandemic.

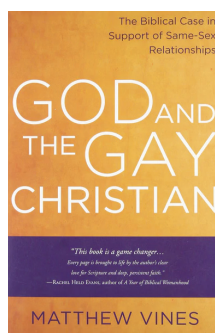
A sea change on LGBTQ rights

Cumberland First Baptist is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA (ABC), which Watkins describes

as being “on the moderately progressive side” among mainline Protestant denominations. In the early 2000s, Cumberland First Baptist was “on the bubble” because of its move toward becoming an open and affirming congregation. Some affiliated churches viewed it with suspicion, and its openness on LGBTQ issues motivated two congregations to disassociate from the ABC region that it belongs to.

Since then, Watkins says, the region has achieved a certain peace on the issue. Mostly, “no one talks about it.”

Even so, the trend is moving in the opposite direction nationally. The re-emergence of LGBTQ issues as a divisive force in U.S. politics—and within denominations—comes as something of a surprise, given the dramatic shifts in public opinion over the past two decades.

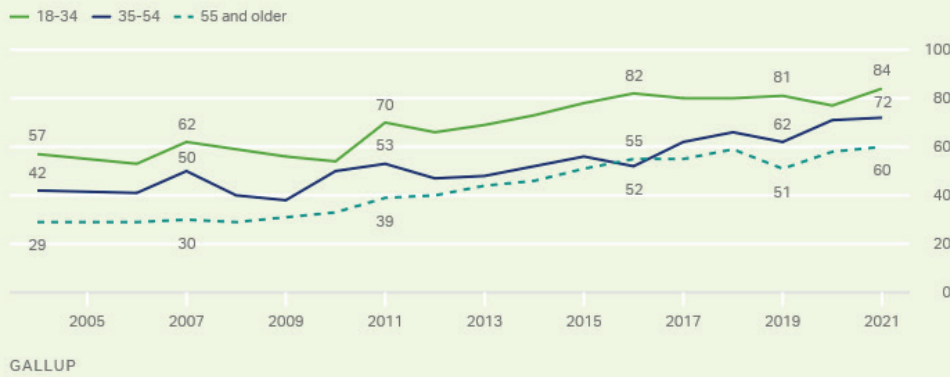


In 2015—the same year the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision legalized same-sex marriage nationwide—a prominent young evangelical wrote *God and the Gay Christian*. The author, Mathew Vines, outlined the “biblical case in support of same-sex marriage.” Excerpts and interviews with him appeared in several high-profile media outlets.

Vines’s identity as both a gay man and an evangelical seemed to harmonize with a shift toward greater acceptance of same-sex marriage among religious denominations and traditions. “Aware that they are seen by many as bigots,” the *New York Times* reported in 2015, “some evangelical leaders are trying to figure out how to stand firm without alienating the rising share of Americans—especially younger ones—who know gay people and support gay rights, or who may themselves come out as gay.”

Support for Gay Marriage, by Age Group -- 2004-2021

% Saying same-sex marriages should be recognized by the law as valid



this month, proclaiming that it wants “to be free of divisive and destructive debates.”

As with same-sex marriage, the wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation and the turmoil within denominations are sharply at odds with the drift of public opinion.

A Public Religion Research Institute survey in March

2022 found that, overall, 79 percent of all respondents supported protections for LGBTQ people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations, and housing.

By religious affiliation, support was highest—roughly in the mid-80s—among Jewish people, Catholics “of color,” Buddhists, and Protestant denominations that leaned liberal or progressive. But even among white evangelical Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses (the categories with the lowest level of approval) 61 percent and 59 percent favored nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people. In both cases, the percentage had risen several points since 2015.

There was plenty of evidence showing a profound shift in public attitudes.

About one-fourth of respondents approved of same-sex marriage in 1996, when Gallup first asked the question in its annual survey of U.S. values. In 2000, roughly one-third of respondents approved. In 2015, the number was 60 percent, and by 2021, the approval rate was 70 percent.

The political backlash

Gallup noted that the trend on same-sex marriage mirrored the trajectory of public attitudes on interracial marriage.

Deeply divisive for most of the twentieth century, 16 states banned the interracial unions before the Supreme Court struck down the bans in 1967. It subsequently has gained nearly universal acceptance. By 2013, 87 percent of Americans approved. In just two generations, opposing interracial marriage had evolved from a timeless, to-die-for truth (among many Americans) to a non-issue.

LGBTQ rights may be on a similar path over the long run. But if so, the current moment is a significant detour. By late March, 238 bills to restrict LGBTQ rights had been introduced in state legislatures, according to NBC News. Half of those involved transgender rights. By contrast, there were only 41 bills aimed at LGBTQ rights in 2018.

LGBTQ tensions are also dividing the United Methodist Church, which is expected to formally split when its General Conference convenes in 2024. (The pandemic has repeatedly delayed the Conference.) In some sense, the denomination has already split: A conservative splinter group, the Global Methodist Church, launched

The angst of evangelicals

Political calculations explain the efforts in red-state legislatures to restrict LGBTQ rights, despite public opinion. Culture-war issues are a potent motivator for socially conservative voters.

Locally, the Indiana Family Institute (IFI) and its advocacy arm, the Daniel Initiative, are strong political voices and organizing forces among evangelical Protestant and conservative Catholic congregations. The Daniel Initiative describes its mission as building relationships “between the ministers of God and the ministers of government.” Abortion, education, and LGBTQ issues are the IFI’s top priorities, based on recent news releases and social-media posts. “The alternative to the culture war is a culture surrender,” a recent meme posted to its Facebook page proclaimed. (The quote was attributed to the conservative pundit Glenn Beck.) “There is no neutral ground and there is no neutral option. There is no choice but to fight.”

But this political calculus does not fully reflect the realities in the pews right now. Many evangelical

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churches are seriously grappling with what it means to be both tolerant toward LGBTQ people and true to their interpretation of scripture.

Traders Point Christian Church on the northwest side of Indianapolis, is a case in point. A multisite congregation of about 9,000 members, it has been named one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation, and its theology is firmly conservative evangelical: One of its core beliefs is that "salvation is only given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, the redemption of our sin." Yet it also cultivates an open and welcoming stance and avoids the kind of harsh rhetoric sometimes associated with evangelicals.

In 2019, the lead pastor at Traders Point Christian Church, Rev. Aaron Brockett, gave a sermon that summed up the swirling tensions around LGBTQ issues in many circles. It was part of a series, called "Asking for a Friend," that focused on especially sensitive topics.

"I know I'm not getting out of this message without having some of my blood drawn," Brockett said. "I know I'm throwing myself out into oncoming traffic, and I know I'm not going to be able to please everyone with this message. And yet it's so important." Brockett joked at one point that much of his audience hadn't "taken a breath in the last five minutes" because of the tensions in the room. "For far too long Satan has been having a field day with this issue, creating so much pain and confusion and division," Brockett said. "And in the name of Jesus we just need to humbly stand up and say, 'Enough.'"

His sermon was ultimately orthodox to the letter, arguing for abstinence among LGBTQ people: "It's the decision to engage that crosses that line" into sin, Brockett said. "Regardless of orientation, while you may not be able to control who you're attracted to, you can control the decisions that you make about your relationships, and how you express your sexuality."

The remarkable thing about the sermon was not that Brockett broke with evangelical theology. He explicitly did not do that. The remarkable thing was that he foregrounded love and empathy, holding up Jesus' friendship with outcasts as a model for the church.

Equally remarkable: Brockett's plea for Christians to model love and empathy—in a sermon that focused on LGBTQ people—was so sensitive and controversial that it had his audience on the edge of their seats.

A multi-level challenge

LGBTQ discussions are sensitive and divisive because—more explicitly and powerfully than any other issue—they force answers to a fundamental question: What is the purpose of a community of faith? What is its reason for being?

On the surface, the answer seems simple. For many congregations, the purpose is to share and study the truth of sacred scripture. The most relevant questions revolve around what it means to belong to the community, how to minister to those already in the fold, and how to bring more people into it.

The LGBTQ issue challenges this received wisdom on every level.

It raises questions about what scripture teaches: How much of what is claimed as to-die-for gospel truth is actually—as with the old laws against interracial marriage—cultural prejudice?

It forces congregations to grapple with who belongs to the community and the kingdom of God. Which sacred marriages are legitimate? What is sin, and when does it put a person beyond the bonds of fellowship?

It raises questions about the relationship between religious organizations and political engagement. If congregations have obligations beyond the walls of the building, which issues deserve their attention—and what is the best way to work for change?

And what value is added when people of faith become active in the public square?

Congregations and democratic commitments

One answer to the value-added question is that congregations can offer a welcoming space for people to talk and share experiences respectfully.

Rabbi Brett Krichiver of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation sees a hopeful future for congregations—and for U.S. democracy—down this path. Krichiver believes that “we are at the beginning of a renaissance for religious communities” because, at a moment when the political realm is scarred by deep polarization and toxic rhetoric, they can be mini laboratories of democracy.



“I was at a rather conservative African-American Baptist church, and we were talking about LGBTQ rights as human rights,” says Krichiver, who testified in February against a bill that would ban transgender girls from competing in girls’ sports in schools. “And we clearly had very different agendas. But what happened was that my folks who were there (who were LGBTQ) were able to hear someone from the Baptist church say, ‘Look, you can’t ask me to change my religious views, but I can recognize you as a human being. I can recognize that we disagree on this but still respect you.’”

“Now, is that enough? I don’t know if that’s enough. But I know that the Baptists who were there, who heard from LGBTQ folks, now have a personal relationship with them. I can’t say that it will change their views. But it makes it harder to hate someone when you have a personal relationship.”

St. Peter’s United Church of Christ in Carmel has served a similar role, creating a space for dialogue across ideological divides. In 2018, it initiated a program called “Politics in a Purple Church,” in which local politicians and advocates meet with church members (and anyone interested) to discuss a wide range of topics, including gun control, climate change, and LGBTQ rights.

“We find that with some of our local politicians, we can get better conversations going, and we can get some responses that feel real,” says Rev. Lori Bievenour, senior pastor at St. Peter’s, which formally became an “Open and Affirming” congregation in 2005. The point of the series—which was suspended during the pandemic but will likely resume during the 2022 election season—is to create conversations rather than push a point of view.

“What we found is that some of our more politically conservative people were not willing to speak out,” Bievenour says. “They didn’t feel that they had as much freedom to speak out. So, we started ‘Politics in a Purple Church’ because we really want to hear from everyone.

“If what we stand for is inclusion and respect and unity, that means we have to be able to hear the voices that are not our own. That doesn’t mean that I have to allow hate speech. But I do have to understand—when the person who is standing next to me in the choir might not have voted for the same person—I do have to understand why. But I can’t do that if I don’t have a space in which I allow another viewpoint to emerge.”

A closure—and a way forward?

At Cumberland First Baptist, having survived for nearly two centuries lends a certain wisdom and perspective on these tensions. Its current building was constructed in 1913, and the congregation maintains a “pioneer cemetery” where some of Hancock County’s earliest American settlers are buried. When Bob Sanders—the interim pastor who helped the congregation navigate its split in the early 2000s—died last year, he was buried there. Sanders had “dubbed our church a ‘rare holy place’ because of its courage around [the LGBTQ] issue,” Watkins says. “And that’s where he wanted to be laid in the ground.”

The church held a celebration of his life in the spring of 2022. “So, that’s another closure,” Watkins says of the celebration. “We take great solace in the march of time in this place, and the courage of people to build something here, and their commitments.”

After the split, as Cumberland First Baptist transitioned toward a democratic ministry-team model of decision-making and launched its annual summer festival, it also branched out and created new ties to other churches. It joined the Alliance of Baptists, for example, which was formed in 1987 and includes about 140 Baptist congregations in 29 states. (The American Baptist Churches USA remains Cumberland First Baptist’s primary affiliation.) Many of the churches were driven from the Southern Baptist Convention because of their stance on LGBTQ rights and other issues. According to its self-description, the Alliance is “knit together by love for one another and God, combining progressive inquiry, contemplative prayer and prophetic action to bring about justice and healing in a changing world.”

Under Watkins and as part of its affiliation with the Alliance, one of Cumberland First Baptist’s highest priorities has been climate change. The church has invested heavily in eco-friendly renovations to its building, for example. Watkins believes the failure of religious institutions to make themselves relevant on

that issue—as well as LGBTQ rights and a host of other issues—makes them deeply vulnerable.

“I’ll be honest—I don’t know what the future of the church in America is. I’m on the fence about whether there’s a path for American Christianity,” he says. “I think people will stay in the church when they realize it’s the place where they can contribute and make a difference.

“We have not provided good answers to thoughtful young people about why they should be part of this institution, or why they should support it. We have not talked openly enough, and creatively enough, about what we mean by God. Some of the language is just disengaging, and there’s not enough going on. Young people are checked out. And they’re going to inherit the earth, checked out or not.”

One certainty is that the future holds many more surprises and challenges. Through the course of Cumberland First Baptist’s nearly two-century journey, it has often felt as if things might fall apart at any time. Yet it is still alive, active, and quietly doing its work in its place. Transformed by the LGBTQ issue, it leans into the future with a hopeful realism.

“Any moment in time is just a moment in time,” Watkins says. “I tell my kids when they struggle, this is not your life. This is a moment in time, but it does not define you. You will get through this. And I think that’s true, too, when you’re part of something that has age to it. Which is another good reason to stick with the church.”

Written by Theodore M. Anderson

Responsive Congregations is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the IU School of Liberal Arts and Polis Center, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights [here](#). Read past issues [here](#). For more information, contact polis@iupui.edu.