

The "next big thing" for the progressive church

By [E. Carrington Heath](#)

September 22, 2014

"So, now that we have LGBT equality in the progressive mainline church, what are we going to do now? What's the next big thing?"

I get asked that question from time to time. The tide seems to have turned in many ways when it comes to the inclusion of LGBT people in the church and in our country as a whole. Doors to ordination are opening, marriages are being blessed, and the church is growing more comfortable with talking openly about sexuality and gender. And so, the question is already being asked by some: What shall we work on next? What big issue does the church need to face?

I have a few thoughts. First, I don't think the church is anywhere near coming to the end of discussions about full inclusion for LGBT people. Yes, we are far better off than we were ten years ago, and even further from where we were before that, but we aren't close to being completely inclusive yet. (By the way, we're not quite done with debates over the role of women or confronting our complicity in racism, either.)

But, for purposes of discussion, let's just say it is time for the mainline church to start looking for the "next big thing" that will unite us in purpose and divide us in debate. What will it be?

I have some ideas. Caring for the environment is on the top of the list. Responding to immigration and other humanitarian crises is too. So is interfaith understanding. And I don't think it will be too long until the church seriously begins to discuss economic inequalities. There are a lot of possibilities.

I was thinking about that recently. I was sitting in a discussion talking about my views on why it's important for progressive ministers to be able to talk about our faith, and about what Christ means to us. I was talking about discipleship, and why it matters for our often-progressive church. And I was talking about how we've lost so much of our theological heritage, and language of faith. And then the question came, part-curious, part-suspect:

“But what about social justice? Does that not matter to you?”

Like I said, the person who asked didn’t know me. They didn’t know that for the past 20 years I have been openly gay. They didn’t know about the times anonymous anti-gay hate letters showed up in my church’s mailbox during my last call, or about how I’d grown up in a place where being gay could literally get you blown up, or about how Heidi and I had needed to file separate federal tax returns even after we got married.

And they didn’t know about the times my faith had compelled me to take action. They didn’t know about how we had stood in the New York State Capitol for the better part of a week as right-wing Christians protesting against equal marriage had yelled at us that we were going to hell. I’ve gone a few rounds in the social justice arena.

But the person who questioned that? They aren’t alone. So many times when I talk about why the church needs to reclaim discipleship—starting with asking ourselves, “Who do I believe that Jesus is to me?”—even my progressive Christian friends look at me sideways. Those of us who see ourselves as progressive evangelicals often find ourselves being told that we are too dogmatic, too conservative, or too focused on what doesn’t matter.

Except, I think it does matter. I think it matters more than we know.

I often worry that the progressive church has begun to define itself not by our affirmations, but by our repudiations. When compared with our more conservative brothers and sisters we are so quick to say “we aren’t like that.” We proclaim “not all Christians believe that way” with ease. But when it comes to talking about what we *do* believe, we often find we lack the words.

I am sometimes worried that we in the progressive church put the cart before the horse when it comes to social justice. It’s not that I believe we are advocating for the wrong things; it’s that I believe we sometimes advocate for the wrong reasons, acting first and then wedging theological meaning in later.

I am glad that churches stand up against anti-gay measures. I wish more would. But I want us to talk about why our Christian convictions are compelling us to do so.

I give thanks for every church member who stands and protests against the death penalty, but I want us to be able to talk about what the crucified Christ taught us about the value of human life.

I respect every minister who holds a placard in front of the White House and speaks about climate change, but I wish I heard more about how God created the world and called it good, and why that's why we can't be silent.

When I walk into a voting booth, I take my faith with me. When I cast my votes, I do so in accordance with what the gospel has taught me. I cannot separate the two. And I give thanks for that.

But before I got to this place, I first had to become a disciple. I had to read the gospel for myself. I had to want to follow the Christ they talked about. And only then could I go about the work of living my faith in the public arena, both in the larger church and in the world.

And so when people ask me what the "next big thing" in the church will be, I tell them this: discipleship.

There are a lot of reasons why the church doesn't wield the influence we once had in the public sphere, but I think the main one is this: we have forgotten our foundation. We have forgotten what it means to be disciples. And people can see through us.

Few people are interested in joining just another public advocacy group. And those who are can find far more effective ones. The progressive church is not the Democratic Party at Prayer, to borrow a phrase. And if we continue to lose our theological literacy, and our ability to talk about our faith, that's all we will end up being. Without a bedrock of belief, the whole enterprise of church-based social justice will crumble.

But that doesn't have to happen.

It's time for progressive Christians to claim discipleship. It's time to get radical, not about our politics or our policies, but about our faith. It's time to stop throwing the baby Jesus out with the bath water, and start putting the horse before the cart. It's time to remember what, and who, we worship. It's time to develop the language of faith. And it's time to see our social justice work as a natural product of our discipleship, not something that competes with it for the church's time.

And only then, when we have gone back to the source and found what ultimately binds us together with God and with one another, can we go out and find the next, next big thing. And whenever that happens, we will be better for it. And we just may find that when it comes to changing the world for the better, the Gospel of Why We Are Different Than Other Christians can't hold a candle to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*