Moderate churches face a particular challenge

by Jeff Brumley in the August 21, 2013 issue

New research predicting the rise of religious progressives and a conservative decline presents a challenge to those in the middle, including moderate Baptists, according to some leading Baptist and other Christian activists and thinkers.

The Public Religion Research Institute survey released in July examined the intersection of economics, politics and faith. Predicting the rise of religious progressives (currently at 19 percent) and the decline of conservatives (28 percent), it shows moderates firmly in the middle with the greatest numbers of all (38 percent).

The poll goes on to focus mostly on the interplay between progressives and conservatives, attributing the latter's decline to younger Americans seeking more action-oriented and less doctrinal expressions of faith.

But it's that same factor, and the rise of the millennial generation, that could spell trouble for moderate churches and denominations, according to experts who examined the study.

One of them is Brian McLaren, who said the survey suggests moderate groups may have to risk alienating traditional members if they are going to attract and keep the millennial and other younger Christians who are driving these trends.

Specifically, that means actively embracing the social justice causes dearest to that generation, including same-sex marriage rights and issues around poverty and hunger, said McLaren, a Christian theologian, author and activist.

Furthermore, moderates must avoid framing the issue in terms of the old denominational battles that once defined them, he added.

"This is not a choice between the religious right and the old religious left," McLaren said. "The ability to mobilize people for economic action will become more and more important."

PRRI research director Dan Cox said the findings suggest that conservative churches may have to dampen their public identification for politically conservative causes if they want to reduce the exodus of young people.

Moderates, meanwhile, will suffer if they remain quietly in the middle of the big political and social issues of the day. "Many churches, like political parties, will have to adapt their strategies to engage young people," Cox said.

Baptists who studied the survey drew similar conclusions, adding that even those perceived as moderate—like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the American Baptist Churches U.S.A.—may struggle if they fail to make existing progressive leanings better known.

But doing that could also jeopardize those organizations, both now and in the future, said Bill Leonard, professor of Baptist studies and church history at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

"CBF, ABC and sometimes the Southern Baptist Convention—they have such fragile connections to their constituent churches and individuals that public stands on these divisive social issues are very difficult for them," he said.

Leonard pointed out that the CBF and ABC are progressive on women's ordination, though not necessarily on issues regarding homosexuality. CBF's evolving focus on missional church plants and ministries, neo-monastic communities and urban renewal efforts can also be described as progressive, he said.

CBF has been quiet on same-sex marriage and gay clergy issues, allowing its churches and members to decide those issues for themselves.

"CBF folks have often . . . raised questions about what it means to be moderate, and that often meant 'lukewarm' for some people," Leonard said. "So I think the term 'moderate' is in need of some revisiting for CBF types."

There are multiple voices among progressives—topics ranging from support of Palestine and gay marriage to gun violence and climate change—said Carol Blythe, president of the Alliance of Baptists. "We don't avoid controversy."

Blythe said many come to the Alliance from moderate groups, just the way the PRRI survey suggests. —ABP