

Ways things change

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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Theories of change vary widely. Does progress arise from countless participants, working in countless places and ways? Does it require an organized movement? How critical are public, influential leaders? At what point is there a need for precedent to be set from the top down?

The civil rights movement in this country required all of the above. No one really disputes this; debates about it are largely of the chicken/egg variety. These questions come up not out of idle speculation but because Christians see that there is yet work to be done.

In many churches, the civil rights movement has been the defining analogy as we explore issues of sexual identity and practice. Intersections International--a multifaith, multi-ethnic group--has put considerable effort into trying to inspire and sustain change in this area. Its "Believe Out Loud" campaign is a coalition of clergy and laypeople from many of denominations who hope to encourage those who support full inclusion to speak up.

The campaign recently released this video:

There was some controversy this week when *Sojourners* declined to run the video as an online ad. But what's more interesting to me is this comments-field [conversation](#) about the ad itself. Who is this ad for? Is it shooting its cause in the foot by suggesting that the average church's laypeople are downright inhospitable? Can a welcoming pastor's presence override other factors?

The Reconciling Ministries program in the United Methodist Church encourages and cultivates leadership among laypeople. An itinerant pastor's beliefs may not be in line with the congregation's; lay leadership also increases ownership of the process. So when a UM congregation

adopts a "reconciling statement," this comes from an effort within the congregation, not something imposed on it.

But as important as it is for a congregation to express its welcome to all people, in the UMC we do not ordain "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals"--and our clergy are not allowed to officiate at same-sex weddings, civil unions or commitment ceremonies.

That's increasingly difficult for me to bear. My home state recently [adopted](#) a law recognizing civil unions, and now the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has [ratified its constitution](#) to allow for the ordination of gay folks. Yet my beloved church continues to fail to fully welcome everyone. As welcoming as I or my parishioners might want to be, I still feel I'm failing my LGBT brothers and sisters.

How will change come? In the UMC, lay representatives to annual conferences have voice and vote--and these votes are based on membership numbers. So policy change will require numerical growth among reconciling congregations.

But clergy have to get involved, too. A friend of mine--a Roman Catholic and a lesbian--knows that there are allies within her parish, but she wants to know that the priest welcomes her, too. She wants to be assured that she won't be turned away from the table or made to sit through a demeaning homily. She wants to know she'll be safe at church.

One reason clergy allies might remain closeted is fear of consequences. When I bemoaned the fact that I am forbidden to perform same-sex unions, my husband reminded me that I cannot afford to commit a chargeable offense: I have a marriage. I have young children. There are reasons that Jesus admonished his disciples about the cost of following him.

But though I'm convinced that both grassroots and top-down efforts are needed, I'm also aware of the limitations of political change as an analogy. The church is a voluntary institution. Our work will never involved coercion; the National Guard isn't going to get involved. Our only tool, finally, is persuasion.

And our denominations are not merely populated by opposing caucuses. That's why it's so important to be humble and loving even as we try to speak truth. I found this to be the most powerful witness of the [churchwide letter from the PCUSA General Assembly](#):

The feelings on both sides run deep. However, as Presbyterians, we believe that the only way we will find God's will for the church is by seeking it together - worshiping, praying, thinking, and serving alongside one another.