

Covenant Church expels congregation and pastors over LGBTQ inclusion

The vote expelling the 145-year-old First Covenant Church Minneapolis was the first time the Evangelical Covenant members have removed a congregation from the denomination.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue

In voting to expel a historic Minneapolis congregation and two pastors from its ranks at its annual meeting in late June, the Evangelical Covenant Church attempted to close off debate about LGBTQ inclusion.

John Wenrich, the denomination's president, argued that the church and the two pastors were "refusing to live in harmony with our communally discerned position" advocating abstinence outside of marriage. If further discussion were allowed, Wenrich wrote to church members in May, "we will continue to devote time, energy, and resources to conversations we have held now for more than 20 years."

Delegates to the annual meeting, which took place in Omaha June 27-29, easily surmounted the two-thirds threshold to expel the 145-year-old First Covenant Church Minneapolis, as well as its pastor, Dan Collison, and a retired pastor, Steve Armfield, from its roster of churches and clergy.

It was the first time the denomination, which has 875 congregations, has expelled a church. Last year, the denomination suspended a chaplain at an affiliated university, North Park, after she presided at the same-sex wedding of a former student. Judy Peterson wrote that she was later fired from her job.

A minority of ECC churches plan to continue extending full rights to LGBTQ members.

Awaken West Seventh, a nine-year-old church in St. Paul that draws 400-500 people to its two Sunday services, writes on its website: "We welcome and invite LGBTQ+ persons to participate at all levels of church life: partaking of the sacraments,

serving in ministry, joining in partnership (membership), and holding leadership roles.”

Although the church, which rents space in a former Catholic cathedral, is prohibited in its lease from holding same-sex weddings in its building, it has vowed to help couples find a space where they can celebrate their vows. And it will allow its ministers to officiate.

“Our posture is we think we’re a Covenant church and the way we’re going about our life together is consistent with Covenant theology and history,” said Micah Witham, the church’s pastor, who was suspended for six weeks in 2017 after he prayed at a wedding for a lesbian couple from the church. “We’re going to be Covenant until we’re told otherwise.”

First Covenant in Minneapolis began its new chapter as an independent congregation with an upbeat service June 30 attended by at least 300 people, including approximately 150 newcomers offering their support. Collison, the congregation’s pastor, said the church is debt-free and will keep its historic brick building in downtown Minneapolis. It has numerous ministries, including a homeless shelter, that will continue.

The denomination, which defines itself as “evangelical, but not exclusive; biblical, but not doctrinaire; traditional, but not rigid,” had been recognized for offering “freedom in Christ.” For example, the ECC has been ordaining women for years, even though traditionalists point to Bible passages that require women to be silent in church. The ECC also allows a range of practices on baptism, allowing both infant baptism and baptism of people old enough to give a profession of faith.

Wenrich, ECC president, said that the denomination has turned down ministers and churches that wanted to join the denomination if they disagree with Covenant’s “communally discerned positions.”

Covenant churches that disagree with denomination’s views have also left voluntarily in the past, which he sees as a better outcome.

“I would hope churches and pastors would have the integrity to say they have changed their minds,” he said, “they have changed who they are and they don’t fit any longer.” —Religion News Service

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