

Americans say religious messages fuel negative views of gays

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Oct. 21, 2010

Most Americans believe messages about homosexuality coming from religious institutions contribute to negative views of gays and lesbians, and higher rates of suicide among gay youths, a new poll reports.

While split on whether same-sex relations are sinful, Americans are more than twice as likely to give houses of worship low marks on handling the issue of homosexuality, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Oct. 21.

A plurality (45 percent) of Americans, however, give their own house of worship a 'A' or 'B' grade on how it handles homosexuality.

After a recent spate of teen suicides prompted by anti-gay harassment and bullying, the poll indicates a strong concern among Americans about how religious messages are impacting public discussions of homosexuality.

Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say religious messages about homosexuality contribute to 'negative views' of gays and lesbians, and nearly two-thirds (65 percent) see a connection to higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

'I think we are, without a doubt, making progress,' said Brent Childers, executive director of Faith in America, a nonprofit organization founded in 2005 to combat negative religious messages about homosexuality.

'There is a growing awareness and understanding about the harm that is caused when society places a religious or moral stamp of disapproval on the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, especially youths.'

Other findings from the PRRI/RNS poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, include:

-- Nearly half of Americans age 18-34 say messages from places of worship are contributing 'a lot' to negative views of gay and lesbian people, compared to just 30 percent of Americans age 65 and older.

-- More than 40 percent of Democrats say that messages about homosexuality coming from places of worship are contributing 'a lot' to higher rates of suicide among gay and lesbian youth, compared to 17 percent of Republicans.

-- More than 40 percent of Americans give places of worship a 'D' or an 'F' when it comes to handling the issue of homosexuality; only 16 percent would give them an 'A' or a 'B.' However, Americans rate their own places of worship significantly higher: 45 percent give it an 'A' or 'B,' and only 17 percent would give it a grade of 'D' or 'F.'

-- White evangelicals are most satisfied with their church's handling of homosexuality, with 75 percent giving it an 'A' or a 'B.' Catholics are the most critical, with nearly a third 'twice as many as any other group' giving their church a 'D' or 'F.'

When responses were broken down demographically, along with political divisions, the PRRI/RNS poll found that women and younger Americans are more likely to approve of same-sex relations, as well as say that messages from religious bodies contribute to negative attitudes about gays and lesbians.

PRRI's research director, Daniel Cox, said previous studies have found that women -- although more likely to regularly attend services and have higher levels of religious commitment -- are more likely to have gay friends. Young people, too, are also more likely to know someone who is openly gay.

"Social relationships are one of the most important factors in determining whether someone will be supportive of gay and lesbian issues," Cox said.

Some faith leaders have modified their messages in light of the growing gap between public opinion and traditional religious teachings on homosexuality.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members poured millions into passing California's 2008 ban on same-sex marriage, has denounced anti-gay bullying, saying Mormons have a special responsibility to be kind to minority groups due to their own history of persecution.

But conservative culture warriors for whom homosexuality is a defining issue insist their message is needed now more than ever.

"There is no contradiction between Christian compassion and a call for holy living," Family Research Council president Tony Perkins wrote recently in *The Washington Post*. "But the life which is holy ... or even healthy ... requires abstinence from homosexual conduct. We would do no one a favor if we ceased to proclaim that truth."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, was based on telephone interviews conducted of 1,010 U.S. adults between Oct. 14 and 17, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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