

Affirming LGBT Churches on the Rise in Louisiana

Louisiana has been a religious hub since its inception. With a strong Baptist influence in the northern part of the state and Catholic dominance in the south, the state tends to be conservative religiously.

Although many Louisiana residents consider Christianity their moral construct, traditional Christian values seem to be shifting.

“We affirm and include LGBTQIA+ folks as vital members of our worship, programs and social life,” Donna Yelverton said.

Yelverton, a volunteer worker for the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, proudly embraces her views, which are antithetical to the conservative religious bent in the state. She grew up in a “fundamentalist” church and knew she didn’t believe the same things.

“There is no creed, no required beliefs,” Yelverton said, “Only a covenant that addresses how we treat each other and work together to make the world a better place.”

The Unitarian Church isn't the only denomination in the Deep South with a new liberal mindset. St. Margaret's Episcopalian priest Tommy Dillon believes it's increasingly important to welcome people from all backgrounds.

"Yes, I've faced some tough challenges, especially being the first openly gay priest in the Diocese of Louisiana," Dillon said. But he is equal to the challenge, forging ahead with a more inclusive mindset.

"Jesus' ministry was all about inclusivity and love, especially for those whom society had pushed aside," Dillon said.

Unlike Yelverton, Dillon was raised in his church. His mother's family was Anglican from England, and they started a church in Baton Rouge. His dad grew up Baptist, and his family regularly alternated between attending the Baptist and Episcopalian churches.

"It's been a rich, diverse experience that's shaped who I am as a priest," Dillon said.

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge and St. Margaret's Episcopal hosts LGBT-affirming events. Yelverton's church has been named a "Welcoming Congregation," which means it includes LGBT+ people in worship, program, and social life.

The Unitarian church holds an annual “QueerFete,” which features queer musicians who perform in front of the congregation. This year's installment will be held on Oct. 19. An LGBT flag hangs in the sanctuary, and pronoun stickers are offered to those in attendance.

“We conducted same-sex commitment services and held the first legal gay wedding in the state,” Yelverton said. “We advocate for justice, freedom and equality in the greater society. We lobby at the legislature against oppression.”

The Episcopal and Unitarian religions differ in their beliefs about Jesus and God. Unitarians believe Jesus and God are separate and that Jesus is only a man. Episcopalians believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Despite these theological differences, the congregations are cordial and even host joint events. Both denominations agree on acceptance.

Maida Owens, a Unitarian church member, said, “The church has helped me understand my unconscious biases and my white privilege as never before.”

These communities go against historical norms, which has led to backlash against these ministers and their churches. Dillon has encountered challenging moments; he was ordained, but not without some pushback.

“My hope is that, through my work, the church can become a place of true healing, where everyone feels like they belong,” Dillon said. “I want people, especially younger generations, to

redefine what it means to be Christian—not as a judgmental or exclusive label, but as a faith rooted in love, justice and the pursuit of a better world.”

Dillon believes when people see real LGBT Christians, their hearts often change. He contends that “Christian” shouldn’t be an exclusive label but should be offered to and available for everyone.

The Unitarians welcome everyone from any religion. They even draw from other religious texts. They rely on Jewish and Christian teachings to call upon a higher power’s love. The church also embraces troves of humanist, scientific, and otherworldly texts.

“Earth-centered wisdom instructs us to care for our earth and live in harmony with nature,” Yelverton said. “We demonstrate our commitment to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion while opposing racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, ageism, transgender oppression, religious oppression and any other type of oppression that gives one group power and privilege at the expense of another.”

The church focuses particularly on equity for Black people. Because of the historical racial abuses in the Deep South, radical hospitality is viewed as a mission of utmost importance. They desire to meet the needs of every kind of person. Consumed with a passion to care for all who enter, Yelverton unapologetically welcomes all, especially those rejected by others.

“We work to ensure that we preemptively consider and provide the radical hospitality needed to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of all people,” Yelverton said.

She emphasized this hospitality includes all ages, races, ethnicities, cultures, gender identities, sexual preferences, social classes, socioeconomic levels, educational levels, professional roles, religious or spiritual beliefs, mental or physical abilities, body sizes, appearance, and degrees of literacy.

“After my divorce from a man, I continued to attend the church,” one lesbian Unitarian church member said. “When I met and married my girlfriend, I was treated no differently, which felt very affirming.”

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge and St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church are not the only LGBT-affirming organizations in the area. The Metropolitan Community Church of Baton Rouge is part of an international affirming Protestant Christian denomination.

The church declares that lives are transformed when people are freed from the oppressive religious environment.

The idea is the same in these affirming churches: welcome those who may be closed off by the world and provide an alternative to the traditional church.



Yelverton and two church leaders are pictured with inclusivity artwork.



Unitarian church choir singing.