

# Whether to Adopt Statements on Homosexuality in Two Denominations: A Research Note

PAUL A. DJUPE  
LAURA R. OLSON  
CHRISTOPHER P. GILBERT

*Some of the most contentious issues in American religion today concern homosexuality. In 1998, we asked 2,300 clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church whether their denomination should adopt official statements on homosexuality. A year later, we asked the same question of 1,600 church members in 60 of those clergy's congregations. In this research note, we analyze the attitudes of clergy and church members about beginning the process to compose formal denominational statements on homosexuality. We find great differences between the two denominations, reflecting established conflict in the Episcopal Church and a lack thereof in the ELCA. The attitudes of both clergy and church members, shaped by denominational context, reflect their general attitudes toward gay rights and the public involvement of the denomination. Clergy exhibit particular concern about how a denominational statement might affect their own congregation, and church members take significant cues from their clergy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Mainline Protestant denominations have been embroiled in public debate about homosexuality since the 1970s (Anderson 1997; Cadge 2002; Wood and Block 1995). The past 10 years have witnessed a dramatic intensification in these debates as some mainline Protestant denominations have adopted more accepting attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Clergy have played important roles in structuring debates about homosexuality, speaking from the pulpit and in other public forums about their stances on gay rights. Some have joined national and local interest groups that work on homosexuality-related issues. Above all, clergy minister to people in their congregations who are concerned about both homosexuality as a concept and gays and lesbians as people. Clergy can initiate discourse with the capability, if they choose to take advantage of it, to shape attitudes about controversial issues like homosexuality among their congregation members and even denomination-wide. However, relatively little research has been conducted about either clergy's attitudes toward homosexuality (but see Olson and Cadge 2002; Wellman 1999) or the effect clergy have on church members' opinions (but see Djupe and Gilbert 2002a). Except for the present study, no research has been conducted on attitudes toward formal denominational statements about homosexuality.

One of the most important tides in denominational politics concerning homosexuality in recent years has been the development and refinement of formal denominational statements on policy regarding homosexuality. To what extent do mainline Protestant clergy and church members want to begin the process of adopting official denominational statements? In this research note we analyze the circumstances under which clergy and laity might support the implementation

*Paul A. Djupe is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Denison University, Granville, OH 43023. E-mail: djupe@denison.edu*

*Laura R. Olson is Associate Professor of Political Science, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634. E-mail: laurao@clemson.edu*

*Christopher P. Gilbert is Professor of Political Science, Gustavus Adolphus College, 800 W. College Ave., St. Peter, MN 56082. E-mail: cgilbert@gustavus.edu.*

of official denominational statements about homosexuality, as well as the effect clergy have on church members' attitudes toward the denomination undertaking the process of producing such statements.

#### DATA AND DESIGN: ELCA AND EPISCOPAL CHURCH CLERGY AND CONGREGATIONS

We undertook a two-stage study of clergy and congregations in two mainline Protestant denominations: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church. In the first stage (conducted in 1998 and 1999), we surveyed 2,400 clergy from the two denominations,<sup>1</sup> asking detailed questions about their political activities and beliefs, as well as assessing their perceptions of congregational political views and activism. Following the clergy surveys, in 1999 we surveyed members in sixty congregations (38 ELCA, 22 Episcopal) whose clergy had responded to our initial survey. We sent mail surveys, paralleling the clergy survey in content, to a random set of members from each congregation; approximately 1,050 ELCA and 550 Episcopal congregation members responded.<sup>2</sup>

We felt that the ELCA and Episcopal Church were particularly important denominations to study because they were not included in recent research on the political activities of U.S. clergy (Guth et al. 1997). With a combined membership of 7.5 million people, similar worship styles, and a formal bilateral agreement on aspects of theology and worship practices, the ELCA and Episcopal Church remain particularly significant actors in American mainline Protestantism.

At the time of the data collection, both denominations had been attempting to grapple with the issue of homosexuality formally for at least a decade. In the early 1990s, the ELCA attempted to draft an official statement on homosexuality, but the debate over the statement caused deep intradenominational division, and the resulting statement was brief and vague (Cadge 2002). Since 1999, the ELCA has been engaged in an ongoing effort to come to terms with homosexuality, but that effort had not yet begun when our survey was in the field. In the Episcopal Church, formal discussion of homosexuality began in 1976. Since that time, the denomination officially has been supportive of gays and lesbians, and it has undertaken numerous studies and organized conversations on the subject of homosexuality (Cadge 2002). Moreover, unlike the ELCA, the Episcopal Church ordains openly gay priests and deacons, and has done so for some time (for more, see Coulmont (2005)).

This rich data set allows us to examine the calculus that religious people use in formulating their opinions about denominational policies. Because our research design is conceived specifically to connect clergy-reported actions and attitudes with those of congregation members, we also have an opportunity to assess the efficacy of clergy attempts at persuasion. In this particular instance, we are concerned with the extent to which clergy might be able to lead congregational opinion on issues related to sexual orientation.

#### SHOULD THE DENOMINATION ADOPT STATEMENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY?

We begin in Table 1 by showing the distribution of clergy and church member opinion on the question of whether their denomination should take a formal stand on homosexuality. We also provide data on clergy's perceptions of where they think their congregations stand on making denominational statements, as well as the actual attitudes of the church members themselves. Do clergy accurately gauge the views of their congregation members? For a more direct test of the accuracy of clergy perceptions, Table 1 also lists the perceptions of clergy from the 60 churches where we surveyed church members.

Majorities of both sets of clergy (54 percent of ELCA pastors and 56 percent of Episcopal priests) disagree that their denominations should adopt such statements. Roughly a quarter of ELCA clergy and a third of Episcopalians agree that the denomination should take a stand. While opinions are clearly polarized (relatively few are neutral), Episcopal priests are more divided than

**TABLE 1**  
**SHOULD THE (ELCA/EPISCOPAL CHURCH) ADOPT STATEMENTS ON**  
**HOMOSEXUALITY? CLERGY STANCES, CLERGY PERCEPTIONS OF CHURCH**  
**MEMBER STANCES, AND ACTUAL CHURCH MEMBER STANCES**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>ELCA</b>					
Clergy	7.3	19.2	19.5	39.8	14.3
Perceived congregational majority view, all clergy	9.6	28.0	29.0	27.9	5.5
Church members, actual	6.0	24.4	39.2	19.5	10.8
Perceived congregational majority view, clergy in participating churches	2.0	43.1	26.6	21.2	7.1
<b>Episcopal Church</b>					
Clergy	16.6	15.9	11.7	26.4	29.5
Perceived congregational majority view, all clergy	18.9	30.5	29.2	15.2	6.3
Church members, actual	10.8	23.8	32.4	18.1	14.9
Perceived congregational majority view, clergy in participating churches	4.1	38.8	29.0	14.8	13.2

*Source:* ELCA/Episcopal Church 1998–1999 Clergy Study and 1999–2000 Congregational Study.

ELCA clergy: Seventeen percent of Episcopalians strongly agree that statements are necessary, compared with 7 percent of ELCA clergy, and half as many Episcopal priests (12 percent) are neutral on the issue compared to ELCA pastors (20 percent). In part this finding is likely due to the fact that unlike the ELCA, the Episcopal Church ordains openly gay individuals as priests and deacons. Moreover, since the time of our survey, the Episcopal Church has been roiled by homosexuality-related issues; some parishes have now left or are threatening to leave the U.S. Church, forging new ties with more conservative branches of the worldwide Anglican Communion instead (Banerjee 2004). The 2003 elevation of Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson, who is openly gay, to the position of Bishop of New Hampshire surely has been one of the major reasons behind the exacerbation of the polarization we already observe in our 1998–1999 data.

ELCA clergy perceive their church members to be divided on the issue of denominational statements on homosexuality (38 percent feel that their congregations would support statements and 34 percent think they would oppose them). Episcopal priests perceive more support for denominational statements among their church members: nearly half of all congregations are perceived to be supportive, with just one-fifth opposed.

Table 1 suggests that clergy perceptions are not especially accurate gauges of congregant opinion. In the aggregate (that is, without matching individual clergy to their churches), far fewer ELCA congregation members agree that the denomination should take a stand than their clergy predict (30 percent, vs. the ELCA clergy's perception that majorities would agree in 45 percent of congregations), and many more are neutral than the clergy had expected. On the other hand, fewer Episcopal congregation members are neutral on the question of whether the denomination should take a stand on homosexuality than the clergy predicted. In fact, they are evenly divided: one-third of church members agree, are neutral, and disagree. This finding is important because it suggests that clergy who limit themselves from public advocacy on homosexuality out of fear that their congregation members will not agree with their views may perceive their congregations' attitudes incorrectly.

**TABLE 2**  
**ELCA AND EPISCOPAL CHURCH CLERGY STANCES, CLERGY PERCEPTIONS**  
**OF CHURCH MEMBER STANCES, AND ACTUAL CHURCH MEMBER STANCES**  
**ON WHETHER “HOMOSEXUALS SHOULD HAVE ALL THE SAME RIGHTS AND**  
**PRIVILEGES AS OTHER AMERICAN CITIZENS.” (ROW PERCENTS)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>ELCA</b>					
Clergy	43.4	39.4	7.9	6.8	2.6
Perceived congregational majority view, all clergy	4.7	27.3	31.5	29.5	7.1
Church members, actual	21.6	36.3	23.5	11.0	7.5
Perceived congregational majority view, clergy in participating churches	2.3	15.2	36.2	39.5	6.8
<b>Episcopal Church</b>					
Clergy	65.0	21.6	4.9	4.2	4.1
Perceived congregational majority view, all clergy	18.1	38.6	24.5	13.5	5.2
Church members, actual	34.8	39.3	14.4	5.5	6.0
Perceived congregational majority view, clergy in participating churches	16.1	71.3	8.8	3.8	—

*Source:* ELCA/Episcopal Church 1998–1999 Clergy Study and 1999–2000 Congregational Study.

Perhaps the difference in how the two denominations address the issue of homosexuality reflects differing general attitudes toward gay rights. The positions of clergy and church members on gay rights are shown in Table 2. This table shows that over 80 percent of clergy in both denominations overwhelmingly favor equal treatment of gay and lesbian people. Congregation members are more conservative on the issue, but not by much. Over 70 percent of Episcopalian church members and just over half of ELCA church members support equal treatment of gays and lesbians.

Clergy in the two denominations differ markedly in how accurately they perceive the views of their denomination's members on the legal treatment of gays and lesbians. Episcopal priests who lead a congregation from which we sampled members provide a fairly accurate snapshot, even overestimating support for equal treatment. On the other hand, ELCA clergy are off in their perception by a factor of three, which shows that they drastically underestimate congregational support for gay rights. Again, the effects of denominational controversy appear dramatic. Years of denominational (and in many cases, congregational) dialogue about homosexuality seem to give Episcopal priests a fairly accurate understanding of where their congregations stand on gay rights. It is also clear that supporting equal treatment for gays and lesbians in society does not spill over neatly into support for the denomination taking a position on homosexuality. Clearly some other dynamic is at work with regard to the formulation of attitudes about whether the denomination should produce formal statements on homosexuality.

It is important to acknowledge the obvious fact that our dependent variable is not directional. It does not ask respondents what specific stance the denomination ought to take on matters related to homosexuality; instead, it asks whether the denomination should begin the process of composing such a statement. Therefore, our hypotheses to explain this attitude are different than if the dependent variable incorporated directionality (by asking whether the denomination should condone or condemn homosexuality).

Instead, the dependent variable asks about whether the agenda of the denomination should be set to include issues concerning homosexuality. We suspect that participants/representatives might weigh the answers to several questions as they contemplate whether they should “decide to decide” a conflict over an issue: (1) Will my policy preferences prevail in the prospective process? (2) Is it appropriate for the institution to address this issue? (3) How will addressing the issue affect the integrity of the denomination as an institution? (4) How will addressing the issue affect the level of discord in my constituency? Note that it is easy to have interests that conflict directly, especially when the answers are necessarily tentative due to information uncertainty (as an illustration, see the clergy’s (mis)perceptions of their congregation members’ attitudes in Tables 1 and 2). Many clergy prefer their denomination to be a public witness on current issues, but they also wish to reduce conflict in their denomination and congregation. Some feel it is inappropriate for the denomination to address social issues, but also oppose the actions of some of their cohort and therefore desire a uniform policy.

This dependent variable is highly appropriate from an institutional point of view: the first decision an institution must make concerning a controversial issue is whether to discuss it in the first place. This decision is certainly not reflexive; the very fact of beginning an institutional process may have serious ramifications that are not perfectly understood. Choosing not to discuss an issue formally, where the agenda is being set in such a way that forbids discussion of the issue in the first place, is an exercise of power (Kingdon 1995) and organizational control (e.g., Wood 1970) and is strongly related to policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). When it comes to homosexuality, what kinds of considerations do participants use when contemplating the denominational agenda?

#### MULTIPLE REGRESSION MODEL RESULTS: CLERGY

We now examine the factors that affect clergy’s attitudes about whether their denominations should take a stand on homosexuality. Because of the differences in how the two denominations have confronted gay rights (Cadge 2002), we estimate models for each denomination separately. For ease of presentation and interpretation, the explanatory variables are grouped under four headings corresponding roughly to the questions listed above: (1) gay rights engagement; (2) denomination and church-state separation; (3) congregational factors; and (4) personal factors, which correspond to the questions participants might consider about setting an institutional agenda.

##### *Gay Rights Engagement*

We contend that both clergy and congregation members consider how their denomination is likely to act before they decide whether their denomination should take a formal stand on homosexuality. Because homosexuality-related issues are so divisive, denominations are unlikely to embrace sweeping pro-gay policies, at least in the short term. This is particularly true within mainline Protestantism as it continues to face challenges posed by dwindling memberships (Kohut et al. 2000) and many clergy fear that speaking out on controversial issues will drive congregation members away (Crawford and Olson 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hadden 1969; Jelen 1992; Quinley 1974).

Accordingly, our first guiding expectation is that clergy who support gay rights will oppose denominational statements on homosexuality out of fear that such statements will be more likely to curtail gay rights than expand them. On the other hand, clergy who oppose gay rights will support denominational statements because of their desire for clarity on the issue and a belief that the statement will place restrictions on gay rights.

We also contend that regardless of their normative position on gay rights, clergy who engage in public advocacy on gay rights will be most likely to oppose denominational statements on homosexuality. Strong interest in a political issue can mobilize activism (Olson, Crawford, and

Deckman 2005; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), but in this context it may lead to the opposite outcome. The absence of a strong denominational statement may give clergy the freedom to define the parameters of their own activism around the issue, especially because any such statement is likely to constrict the church-related privileges of gays and lesbians. Thus, our second guiding expectation is that clergy who speak out frequently on matters related to homosexuality will be likely to oppose denominational statements. We also include in this analysis the question of whether the minister's church holds adult education sessions about gay rights, and we expect a similar negative relationship to result: sponsoring such sessions should drive opposition to the denomination taking a stand.

### ***Denominational Factors***

There are still some people, though a diminishing number (Kohut et al. 2000), who wish to avoid entangling the church in political matters. We employ two measures that capture normative attitudes about the entanglement of the denomination and government: whether the denomination should lobby government (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2006) and whether the denomination should be more involved with social and political issues. In both cases, we expect that those who want the denomination to be substantially embroiled in government and politics, showing a belief in the value of public witness, should also desire their denomination to take a stand on homosexuality.

How clergy and congregation members feel about the denomination taking action on homosexuality is also likely to be colored by how they view other denominational enterprises (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2006). One important venture in these two particular denominations is the recent full communion agreement between them, which drew some controversy and significant opposition (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). Clergy who agree with the pursuit of the ELCA-Episcopal Church full communion pact, which signals a general agreement with and trust in the denomination, should be more supportive of the denomination taking a stand on homosexuality. Note that this effect would be independent of theological conservatism since supporters of full communion tend to be relatively liberal (Djupe and Gilbert 2003:196–200), whereas supporters of denominational statements on homosexuality lean in a conservative direction.

### ***Congregational Factors***

It is a clear and consistent finding that the political behavior of clergy is constrained by their congregations. Clergy generally cannot do or say whatever they want with impunity (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974). That notion of the congregation's relationship with their clergy is incomplete, however, since clergy also tend to pursue activities in which they represent their congregation in public life, while at other times, clergy exercise a prophetic voice for their congregations, leading them to reconsider their opinions or think about new issues (Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003).

We include two measures assessing the level of political constraint clergy feel from their congregations. The first of these measures takes the absolute value of the opinion difference between clergy and their congregation members (the church mean opinion) on gay rights. We expect this to be a negative relationship: the larger the opinion difference, the more clergy will be reluctant to see their denomination take a stand on homosexuality. Larger opinion differences almost always mean that the clergyperson is more liberal than the laity (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Hadden 1969), but we have already included the clergy's stance on gay rights and their political ideology. Thus, we can assess with some confidence whether there is an independent effect of wishing to avoid more conflict.

On a similar note, we include the length of clergy tenure at their present church. While clergy may build credit over time, allowing them to pursue projects that the congregation might otherwise oppose (Olson 2000), a longer tenure might also build risk avoidance: a desire to avoid further

controversy in the church. Therefore, we expect to observe a negative relationship, in which a longer tenure will predict more opposition to the denomination taking a stand.

### *Personal Factors*

Clergy's personal views about the denomination taking action are also likely to be structured by their own religious, political, and demographic attributes. Of course, personal factors take on meaning only in context. Thus, we might consider where clergy fit in denominational spectra relative to these attributes and attitudes: Are they religious conservatives or liberals; political liberals or conservatives? Are they women clergy? Are they pastors in rural parishes or particular regions of the United States? How much education do they have? How long have they been in the ministry?

Our specific expectations are as follows. We suspect that both religious and political conservatives favor the denomination making a statement on homosexuality because they know that denominational politics make it unlikely that such statements will be unequivocally supportive of gay rights. Female clergy, in part because they are substantially more supportive of gay rights than male clergy (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Olson Crawford, and Deckman 2005), should be more likely to oppose the denomination taking a stand. More highly educated clergy on the coasts and in urban areas should be more supportive of gay rights (Brewer 2003; Loftus 2001) and wish the denomination to take a stand, as should those who address the issue more often. Longer serving (and, we would suspect, more traditional) clergy should want the denomination to take a stand on homosexuality in order to clarify the denomination's position and to inhibit change (Brewer 2003; Loftus 2001).

### *Empirical Results*

The results presented in Table 3 confirm many of the expectations articulated above, although the results differ markedly between the two denominations. The clearest indicator of the difference is that the Table 3 model explains nearly three-quarters (adjusted  $r^2 = 0.726$ ) of the variance for Episcopal priests but just under one-sixth (adjusted  $r^2 = 0.147$ ) for ELCA pastors. Attitudes about homosexuality are by far more crystallized and rationalized in the Episcopal Church, which speaks to longer, more entrenched battles over sexual orientation issues.

### *ELCA Results*

At the time these data were gathered, the question about the denomination taking a stand on homosexuality was not on the table within the ELCA. Absent present conflict, when clergy think about political issues in the abstract, they fall back on their general attitudes toward denominational political involvement and other denominational endeavors, such as full communion. More specifically, ELCA clergy who want the denomination to lobby and generally be more engaged in political life are more in favor of the denomination taking an official stand on homosexuality. This is an intriguing finding considering that liberals are more likely to want the denomination to be politically engaged (Djupe and Gilbert 2003).

Only one of our measures of the clergy's engagement with gay rights—the frequency of their speech on the issue—has a significant relationship to support for making denominational statements among ELCA clergy. The more clergy speak out on gay rights, the more they oppose the denomination taking a stand. Moreover, and contrary to our expectations, more religious conservatives than religious liberals oppose the denomination taking a stand on homosexuality.

At the same time, clergy who have served longer in the ministry favor the denomination taking a stand, suggesting a desire for clarity from the denomination and some opposition to an updating of the church's values. Clergy in the Northeast, where the political environment has

**TABLE 3**  
**WHETHER CLERGY BELIEVE THEIR DENOMINATION SHOULD ADOPT**  
**STATEMENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY BY DENOMINATION, OLS REGRESSION**  
**ESTIMATES**

Independent Variables	ELCA		Episcopal Church	
	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)
<b>Gay Rights Engagement</b>				
Clergy stance on gay rights	0.031	(0.038)	0.250	(0.033)***
Clergy speech on gay rights	-0.139	(0.030)***	-0.215	(0.028)***
Adult education on gay rights	-0.108	(0.085)	-0.112	(0.072) <sup>0.120</sup>
<b>Denomination and Church-State Separation</b>				
Denomination should lobby government	0.116	(0.033)***	0.111	(0.030)***
Denomination should be more involved with social and political issues	0.166	(0.040)***	0.140	(0.033)***
Full communion stance	0.133	(0.025)***	0.099	(0.024)***
<b>Congregational Factors</b>				
Clergy-church gay rights opinion difference, absolute value	-0.016	(0.034)	-0.084	(0.030)***
Years at present church	-0.001	(0.005)	-0.009	(0.004)**
<b>Personal Factors</b>				
Religious conservatism	-0.077	(0.047)*	0.332	(0.039)***
Political ideology	0.024	(0.044)	0.356	(0.043)***
Years in the ministry	0.009	(0.004)**	0.005	(0.003) <sup>0.119</sup>
Rural church	0.117	(0.075) <sup>0.120</sup>	0.026	(0.066)
Northeastern church	0.148	(0.078)*	-0.040	(0.065)
Male	-0.096	(0.095)	0.175	(0.077)**
Education	0.000	(0.071)	0.024	(0.035)
Constant	1.940	(0.384)	-0.157	(0.230)
	Number of Cases =	1192	751	
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> =	0.147	0.726	
	S.E.E. =	1.064	0.762	

Source: ELCA/Episcopal Church 1998–99 Clergy Study.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

forced the issue most visibly onto the agenda, favor the denomination making a statement; in this context, a denominational statement might take some of the pressure off of individual clergy.

Overall, ELCA clergy report a reasonably high level of support for the denomination becoming more engaged in politics, and this general principle drives their evaluation of whether the denomination should take up the subject of homosexuality again. Only clergy who advocate for gay rights reveal opposition to that move, surely because they have carefully considered not only the nature of the statements the ELCA would be likely to propose, but also because they understand the implications of such statements. The very act of making a statement on homosexuality, which would surely involve detailing the extent to which gays and lesbians may serve openly in the pulpit and whether same-sex couples may marry or receive denominational sanction for their relationships, suggests that gays and lesbians are different and should be treated as such by the ELCA. Naturally, clergy who support gay rights would oppose such a statement.

### *Episcopal Church Results*

The Episcopal Church model results show abundant signs that the debate is in full swing for Episcopal clergy, has reached all corners of the denomination, and has drawn sharp lines of conflict. The same influences seen in the ELCA model are in evidence here, but they are just a few among many. Most prominently, the extent of Episcopal clergy engagement with gay rights structures how they think about their denomination getting involved. Clergy who support gay rights, who speak out on gay rights frequently, and whose churches have held adult education sessions about homosexuality all oppose the denomination taking a stand. The significant effect of ideology shows that in the Episcopal Church, clergy have made the connection between American politics and church politics: liberals oppose the denomination taking a stand.

Like their ELCA counterparts, Episcopal priests' support for denominational lobbying and political involvement leads to support for a formal statement on homosexuality. It is instructive to point out again that liberals are more likely to want their denomination to get more involved, which contradicts the way ideology and opinion on gay rights work here.

Priests with a longer tenure in their congregation oppose the denomination taking a stand on homosexuality, but not because they are more liberal. Longer-serving clergy have a greater stake in the community and may thus be more conflict-averse than newer clergy; they do not wish to add to the number of contentious issues they have to navigate. Similarly, the greater the opinion difference on gay rights between Episcopal priests and their congregations, the less that priests want the denomination to take a stand, signaling a reluctance to be called out to offer their own opinion publicly. Clergy do often exercise a prophetic voice on political matters, but there are exceptions, and Table 3 suggests that gay rights may be one of them.

Support for full communion, which signals support for the overall direction of the denomination, builds support for the Episcopal Church taking a stand on homosexuality, as is also the case among ELCA pastors. In the Episcopal Church, however, religious conservatives, who opposed full communion (Djupe and Gilbert 2003:196–200), are more likely to *support* the denomination taking a stand. Perhaps they have concluded that the statement will be to their liking or that the denomination needs to have an official policy because individual dioceses are taking divergent positions and actions related to homosexuality. Similarly, those serving longer in the ministry are more supportive of making a statement.

Women priests stand out as more likely to address issues related to gay rights and homosexuality, driven by a social justice agenda (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Olson Crawford, and Deckman 2005). In Table 3, we see that female Episcopal priests oppose the denomination composing a new statement on homosexuality, quite likely due to memories of the limits imposed on women's advancement in the denomination until relatively recently.

### **MULTIPLE REGRESSION MODEL RESULTS: CHURCH MEMBERS**

The explanatory factors for church members parallel those used to explain clergy's attitudes. The major difference in the Table 4 models is that we include the clergy's speech on gay rights and their stance for or against gay rights as independent variables. The Table 4 results also strongly parallel the results from the Table 3 clergy models. As before, the model of the opinions of Episcopalians explains much more variance (adjusted  $r^2 = 0.654$ ) than the ELCA model (adjusted  $r^2 = 0.209$ ).

### *ELCA Results*

Our results again confirm that the ELCA was not in the throes of conflict over homosexuality when our survey was in the field. Like their clergy, ELCA congregation members' opinions on whether the denomination should take a stand on homosexuality are strongly shaped by their

**TABLE 4**  
**WHETHER CHURCH MEMBERS BELIEVE THEIR DENOMINATION SHOULD**  
**ADOPT STATEMENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY BY DENOMINATION (OLS**  
**REGRESSION ESTIMATES)**

Independent Variables	ELCA		Episcopal Church	
	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)
<b>Gay Rights Engagement</b>				
Personal stance on gay rights	0.038	(0.041)	-0.369	(0.079)***
Importance of gay rights	0.169	(0.042)***	0.498	(0.075)***
<b>Denomination and Church-State Separation</b>				
Denomination should lobby government	0.231	(0.044)***	0.089	(0.068)
Denomination should be more involved with social and political issues	0.155	(0.045)***	0.038	(0.082)
Full communion stance	0.194	(0.041)***	-0.071	(0.067)
<b>Congregational Factors</b>				
Clergy speech on gay rights	-0.022	(0.047)	0.428	(0.189)**
Clergy stance on gay rights	-0.025	(0.044)	-0.128	(0.196)
Adult education on gay rights	0.157	(0.108)	-0.857	(0.383)**
<b>Personal Factors</b>				
Religious commitment	-0.009	(0.019)	0.048	(0.034)
Political ideology	-0.058	(0.050)	-0.261	(0.080)***
Rural church	0.020	(0.123)	-0.091	(0.255)
Northeastern church	-0.232	(0.131)*	0.258	(0.177)
Male	-0.113	(0.082)	-0.318	(0.128)**
Education	-0.059	(0.036)*	-0.071	(0.064)
Age	-0.000	(0.000)	-0.004	(0.005)
Constant	2.111	(0.476)	10.606	(8.932)
Number of cases =	623		158	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> =	0.209		0.654	
S.E.E. =	0.935		0.699	

Source: ELCA/Episcopal Church 1998–99 Clergy Study and 1999–2000 Congregational Study.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.10$ .

sentiments on whether the denomination should lobby government and engage more in political activism. The more ELCA members want their denomination to engage in politics and lobby government, the more they want it to take a stand on homosexuality.

Few other variables attain significance in the ELCA model. Better educated members and those who live in the Northeast are more likely to oppose the denomination taking a stand. These findings support our overall argument that more liberal individuals oppose denominational position taking on this issue. ELCA members who oppose full communion, like their clergy, are more likely to oppose the denomination taking a stand. Again, this finding illustrates the contention that skepticism toward the denomination and its actions can spill over to affect otherwise unrelated matters (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2006).

### *Episcopal Church Results*

The Episcopal Church member results in Table 4 show that the conflict over homosexuality is more widespread than in the ELCA, but also that the Episcopal membership has come to a different conclusion than their clergy about the likely direction of any denominational statement. For Episcopal congregation members, opposition to equal treatment for gays and lesbians leads to opposition to the denomination taking a stand. Political conservatives and men are also more likely to oppose the denomination taking a stand. However, Episcopalians who prioritize gay rights wish their denomination would take a stand on homosexuality.

Theoretical concerns about church-state separation are not at issue for Episcopalians, nor are their feelings about full communion, both of which suggest again that the debate here is present, personal, and well worn.

Unlike many models of church member political behavior, in which clergy are found to have minimal, if any, effect on political opinions (Djupe and Gilbert 2002a), clergy speech on gay rights in this case has a strong effect on how members think about the denomination taking a stand. Considering the results in Table 4, Episcopal priests may not be having the effect they would like, however. The more they speak out on gay rights, the more their members would like the denomination to produce a statement on it. Yet, holding adult education forums on gay rights in the congregation leads lay Episcopalians to oppose the denomination taking a stand. The difference in effect is surely attributable to context. In the pulpit, clergy may talk about the imperative of treating gays and lesbians equally, whereas in an adult education session deliberation is possible—the likely outcome of a denominational debate on the issue can be explored in more detail and with greater nuance.

Previous work on clergy as political leaders laments the fact that few studies are able to demonstrate the consequences of clergy's political efforts (Crawford and Olson 2001). The results of our present analysis offer a rare glimpse into clergy's actual political effectiveness. Put simply, Episcopal priests affect their members, whereas ELCA pastors do not. In part, Episcopal priests are more likely to be addressing issues concerning homosexuality within the denomination, but Episcopal laity can also attach any information provided about gay rights to something concrete; ELCA members do not have that option. Why is it that clergy can affect opinions about whether the denomination should make statements on homosexuality, but not opinions regarding gay rights itself? This difference in effect affords some important, if tentative, lessons about the exercise of clergy influence. It appears that the issue has to be salient (hence no ELCA effect), targeted at an issue on which clergy have expertise or are provided deference (here, denominational affairs), and one on which clergy and church members largely agree.

### CONCLUSION

The determinants of clergy and church member opinions on homosexuality depend heavily on the specific nature of conflict over this issue within the denomination. At the time of our study, conflict over homosexuality-related issues was better developed and closer to the fore in the Episcopal Church than it was in the ELCA, "eroding [member] apathy" (Wood, 1970:1058). Taking on a controversial issue drives members to rationalize their opinions along theological but also external political lines—surely a result that denominational leaders want to avoid. Under these conditions, we suspect that the Episcopal Church would have a difficult time reframing the debate along more favorable or appropriate lines. Moreover, unfavorable opinions on a controversial issue like homosexuality will draw down the good will and effectiveness of the denomination regarding other matters in the same way feelings of legitimacy affect secular governments. It is not a stretch to say that taking on a controversial issue is potentially dangerous to the organization as it may exacerbate existing weaknesses (Hadden 1969; Wood and Zald 1966).

In his study of conflict in churches over civil rights, Hadden concludes that the conflict is rooted in clashing views on civil rights and the role of the church in public affairs (1969:159). We do not disagree, as these factors are on prominent display here, but we also find that the organizational context of the conflict is important, and *not* just its polity, since that is essentially held constant here. Organizational history drives the nature of current conflicts. A more general sense of support for the organization, such as those represented in opinions on full communion, shapes views on even unrelated organizational policy matters. As in the Episcopal Church, a history of issue conflict may also handicap current efforts at policy change and control as there is certainly little apathy left to help diffuse tensions among Episcopalians on issues related to homosexuality.

Before a policy is enacted, the agenda must be set. And “deciding to decide” is an exercise of significant power as well as a gamble since participants may not have perfect information about how the process will go—different interests and questions may emerge at the stage of policy choice (Kingdon 1995). In the case of these two denominations, especially in the ELCA at the time of the study, there is still uncertainty about where everyone stands and what launching a debate about homosexuality in the denomination might entail. The questions posed at the agenda-setting stage may generate conflicting desires. Many clergy and members believe their faith must bear witness to society and are supportive of their denomination becoming more active in public debates. At the same time, such public debates are divisive, the outcomes are uncertain, and conflict over issues can strike at the organizational robustness of the denomination and local congregations. In the end, the denomination is left in an uncomfortable position, with serious ramifications no matter the action committed or omitted.

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#### NOTES

1. Surveys were sent to 3,000 clergy in each denomination, selected randomly. We received responses from 1,450 ELCA clergy (47.5 percent response rate) and 930 Episcopal clergy (31 percent response rate). The survey cover letter indicated a clear affiliation with an ELCA college located in the upper Midwest (where the majority of ELCA congregations and clergy reside); this factor accounts for the higher response rate among ELCA clergy.
2. Surveys were mailed to approximately 80–100 members of each congregation. In mid-sized to large congregations, respondents were selected at random from the congregation’s current mailing list; for congregations with fewer than 200 adult members, surveys were mailed to one adult member from each household on the mailing list, alternating women and men in households with more than one adult member. Two waves of surveys were sent to each selected respondent. The overall response rate was approximately 27 percent, with the ELCA response rate close to 30 percent and the Episcopal response rate 25 percent.

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**QUERIES**

**Q1** Author: Please update reference “Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert.”